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THE SQUIRE'S COURTSHIP.

VOL. III.

THE SQUIRE'S COURTSHIP.

BY

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"ONE GOLDEN SUMMER,"

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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THE SQUIRE'S COURTSHIP.

CHAPTER I.

THE YOUNGEST SPINSTER IS CONFIDING AND
CONSOLING.

“SCRAMBLE up, Conny,” said my dear, impatient father, whom I found waiting for me at the lodge gate ; (he had been there barely five minutes, but was under the absurd impression that it was at least half an hour). “Time is precious to healers of sick folk, and my good old Dobbin and I have many a hard mile to go over yet. Was the old lady’s choice lace difficult to unearth ?”

His brisk cheerfulness jarred upon me cruelly, as, having scrambled into my seat at his bidding, I pulled my veil over my face, and assured him I was only five minutes beyond the time of our appointment.

"Well, it seemed longer to me," he said, "and perhaps my watch is a trifle fast. Never mind, Conny. It is a glorious day, and I expect you have thoroughly enjoyed your walk."

"I enjoyed my walk *to* the house, papa," I answered gravely, for I could not, to have saved my life, have rallied my spirits yet; "but I had a companion on my backward journey, and unhappily we were not agreed about a matter of some importance. I found Gilbert Radcliff at the Grange."

Then, in a husky voice, and with some interruptions to choke down my tears—I had been kept from crying by the very

excess of my excitement till now—I told my father all—all except the one little secret hidden, as I believed, in the depths of my heart, and which was, in fact, the key to explain the whole.

Having checked the speed of his horse to listen with the utmost attention to my recital, my father at its conclusion turned and looked at me steadily, just as I remembered his having done once before.

“What do the men see in you, Conny?” he asked jokingly, but I knew he only joked to hide his real chagrin, which he thought, dear man, would be only adding to my own vexation and pain.

As I said nothing in reply, he went on presently, and in a more serious tone—

“I always foresaw that this would happen sooner or later, and though I must rejoice at anything which keeps you longer with me, it would not be in human

nature, parental nature, I mean, to triumph in a daughter's rejection of such a chance of happiness and dignity as you have foregone. I have never been ambitious for you, my dear, but apart from the social elevation and opportunities of usefulness you would have gained, I like Gilbert Radcliff himself. He has in him, if I mistake not, all the elements of a true, honest, manly nature, and he would have loved you and revered you in a way you will find most men far too selfish to do. But I ought not to say all this to you now, Conny, my poor child. You have had, no doubt, good and sufficient reasons for what you have done, and if you feel that you could never give love for love, you have been right and wise in your decision. I appreciate your confidence in me, and if you wish it, the subject shall be a dead one between us from this hour."

“You are very good, papa dear,” I said, with my heart sinking down into a darker gulf than ever, now I found how I had disappointed him too; “but indeed I have no wish in connection with the matter, except the wish that it had never happened. Most young women are elated at receiving offers of marriage; but I can truly affirm that I have rarely been more utterly depressed in my life.”

“Well, Conny,” replied my father, and I thought there was a little grimness in his tone, “I cannot much wonder at your falling out with yourself, or with whatever *in* yourself you know to have been the hindrance to your liking this excellent young man well enough to give him hope for the future, even if you could not say ‘yes’ to him to-day. But, as I presume—being a sensible young woman—you *do* know your own mind, there can be no

occasion for you to grieve inordinately over the issue. As for young Radcliff, I trust and believe *he* is wise enough to learn by-and-by to say, in the words of the old ballad—

‘If she be not fair for me
What care I how fair she be?’

And now, my dear, let us be philosophical and cheerful again. When we give up, voluntarily, life’s purple and fine linen, we have still its homespun to fall back upon, and I don’t anticipate that you will be a worse little housekeeper to your old father in his humble dwelling, because you have declined the prospect of being, at some future time, the honoured mistress of the Grange.”

Then he gave his lagging horse the whip, and we neither of us spoke another syllable till he set me down, with a kind and cheery “good-bye,” at our own door.

Walking listlessly into the common sitting-room I usually occupied in the mornings, and wondering how I should get through the remainder of the day with my burden of heavy thoughts, I saw on the table a note addressed to me in Miss Lamb's stiff and old-fashioned handwriting. It seemed to me the perfection of elegant penmanship just then, when an earthquake would have been a welcome break upon my gloomy and self-upbraiding meditations.

It was very short, containing only these words:—

“MY DEAR MISS NEWTON,

“As we are so *soon* to lose you from our *midst*, can you not come either this or to-morrow *evening* and have a *quiet* cup of tea with Penelope and myself? Heber has been called to *London* on sudden

and rather *important* business, and he *may* be absent another *week*. He had not *time* to see you to bid you good-bye before he went, which he was *excessively* sorry for, but I believe my *sister* is charged with more *special* messages for you. We hope you will try to come this afternoon, as it is *so* fine, and we can enjoy the garden up to six o'clock.

“ With love from both,

“ Yours very affectionately,

“ LUCINDA LAMB.”

Well, this was something in the way of passing consolation. For the first time in my life I rejoiced in a chance of avoiding a *tête-à-tête* with my dear father. I was so miserable at having grieved and disappointed him, at having caused him, as I knew was the case, to think me a romantic ninny, that had these facts been impressed on me much

more strongly, or had I had leisure to brood over them alone during the afternoon, I almost think I should have found it in my heart to write a revocation of my morning's sentence to Gilbert Radcliff. There was nothing that ever tried me like bringing trouble or sorrow to those who loved me, and when I considered the matter dispassionately I could not wonder that my father (though, as he had said of himself, one of the least ambitious of men), should be grievously put out at what I had done. *He* was not under a spell as regarded Dr. Marsden ; he had not allowed a poet face and a thrilling voice to bewitch and bewilder him ; he had not weakly given the reins to his imagination and suffered it to drive him hither and thither, as an Autumn leaf is driven by the winds. Consequently he was unable to sympathise to any great extent in my non-appreciation of advan-

tages that half the unmarried women in England would have deemed themselves richly blessed in securing.

My poor, good, tender-hearted father ! How was I repaying him for all the love and care and indulgence he had, from my earliest years, showered with such lavishness upon me ?

But by the time I had taken off my walking dress, rubbed some colour into my white, haggard face, and seated myself with a basket full of needle-work in my working corner, another subject, nearly equally fraught with excitement and restlessness, was pressing upon my weary brain. I had never reckoned upon not seeing Heber Marsden to say good-bye. Even if we were not to meet again we might have parted as friends part ; we might have established some little bond of friendship quite distinct from lover's love,

that should have been the one sweetness to me, mingling in whatever bitterness or sorrow might be in reserve for me, in the long years to come. But he had gone, and I was going, and before we could see each other again, a hundred possibilities—I had one in particular in my thoughts—might have come between us, and obliterated, for him, at any rate, the very remembrance of the strong interest he had once professed in me.

“You are a fool and blind,” I said savagely to myself, as I broke my thread and pricked my fingers, and dropped, successively, every one of my working implements —“you have left the substance, and are in pursuit of a vain shadow, and it serves you right that the shadow is eluding your grasp.”

Then I worked away mechanically and doggedly for another hour, seeing, as in a

vision, the long lonely years I had probably yet to live. And afterwards I quenched my feverish thirst by a strong cup of coffee, which revived me a little, dressed myself quickly, left a note of explanation for my father, and walked to Abbeygates.

Both the sisters remarked, as soon as I went in, how ill I looked, and were very kind and fussy over me. We sat in the sweet, warm garden, enjoying the west wind and the spring perfumes, till tea time, just before which, Miss Lamb growing chilly, I had an opportunity of a few minutes' private talk with the younger spinster.

I had observed all along that she was literally bursting with some intelligence she had to give me or some remarks of her own she had to make, and with the last flutter in the breeze of her sister's shawl that her watchful eyes could discern (I believe the

innocent little woman credited Lucinda with ears of supernatural acuteness), she began—

“Oh, my dear, I have been *dying* to speak to you in private. Lucinda is immensely interested, you see, in all Heber’s hopes and feelings too, but she thinks *we* ought not to interfere, or to become go-betweens, but to let things take their course. Well, perhaps she is right, being wiser than I am in every way, but I can’t forget that I was young once, and that but for adverse circumstances—however”—checking herself by a tremendous effort—“I really must not enter upon that pathetic episode of my youthful days now—I must use the short time we shall have in telling you that our dear Heber went away *miserable*. He has got the idea into his head that your father does not like him, and that you would be sure to be influenced by your

father ; and he is rather a proud man, and shrinks from the risk of being looked coldly upon or dismissed altogether. Now, my dear, I have done my best to comfort him by the assurance that when young women give their hearts (and I am positive any young woman whom he distinguished would give her heart to Heber, not to speak of his brilliant musical talent), they usually manage to get over their fathers, and I think he went away rather less desponding, and he left his farewells with me for you, and a book which he especially wishes you to read, and to keep, he said, till you met again. This I was not to forget for my very life ; and he has marked certain passages that he admires most himself, and I fancy it is written by a Miss Proctor, and is a new volume, you having the first. There was

no other message, I am nearly certain,” said the zealous little woman, putting up her chubby hand to her wrinkling forehead and looking amusingly anxious—“for I have gone over everything to myself at least half a dozen times a day, since his departure. But I think I may confide to you the object of Heber’s sudden journey to London; it strikes me that you have a right to know it. The truth is, a considerable portion of his money is in jeopardy. When he sold his practice here to your father, he invested the sum thus realized, besides the best part of his savings, in some foreign securities which paid a high rate of interest, and looked, he says, very promising at the time. Quite recently something has gone wrong with these, but unfortunately, my dear, I do not understand business well enough to explain

it to you—I only know that our poor dear Heber (who is not much more of a business man than I am of a business woman) is threatened with severe losses, and may probably have to begin working again, which he will not relish at all. And as he is the last man in the world to ask a woman he loved to share poverty with him, or to forego any comforts to which she had been used, why you see, my dear, and I am sure I sympathize with my whole heart,——” Here the speaker hesitated and stammered, and seemed at a loss for words to make her meaning clear to me, without trenching upon too delicate ground, for as so many things had struck her from time to time, since she had become interested in her nephew’s most private feelings, it may have struck her at last that I had never gone a step beyond listening to all she had to say to me, that I had never admitted, by a

single word, the conclusion she had arrived at, nor sanctioned, except by non-protestation, the kindly efforts she was making to expedite the courtship she assumed; but finally she got out, after the assurance of her sympathy—"There may arise difficulties and delays, and Lucinda and myself have always considered long engagements most unwise and hazardous, only circumstances alter cases, and where there is true love it can't be so *very* difficult to be constant; but you will understand, my dear, that I am saying all this of myself, and having no authority from anyone, which perhaps *is* meddling too much, though not intended. I will, if you like, write you a few words, for I am no scribe, when you are down in Wales, just to let you know how things go on, and whether the money is lost or not. And, oh dear, I hope you will enjoy yourself, notwithstanding anxiety

and absence, and you must be sure to read the book, and you will let us hear soon, with your first impressions of the ocean, which Lucinda quite looks forward to, as she says you are so full of imagination and poetry, and will be certain to express yourself elegantly. And now there is Ruth coming to call us to tea, so we cannot continue our most *interesting* conversation at present" (I had not uttered a word, but that did not matter), "which is a pity, but cannot be helped. And oh, my dear, if Lucinda *should* speak to you about Heber, you will please not to mention having heard of his money anxiety. Perhaps I *have* meddled a little too officiously, but I meant no harm, and having once been young and a trifle romantic myself——"

The remainder died off into a faint murmur amongst the sweet-scented shrubs and

flowers, as we went into the house after Ruth, and were speedily engrossed in the unromantic business of discussing tea and muffins.

Miss Lamb did not speak to me of her nephew, which, you may be sure, I was far from regretting ; but she said good-bye to me at the close of the evening very affectionately, and presented me with a handsome guide to South Wales.

I was able, on reaching home, to gladden my father by a partially recovered cheerfulness ; but I did not tell him the source of it, and if he had a suspicion, he kept it carefully to himself.

In another week, which I got through very tolerably in the midst of various domestic arrangements connected with my absence, and my own packing, came the day of our starting for Towyn and the

commencement to me of a new stage in my life's hitherto quiet and uneventful journey.

CHAPTER II.

ARRIVAL AT WILD TOWYN.

ON account of Mrs. Graham's still feeble state of health, we only did half the journey on the first day, resting a night at the delightful old town of Shrewsbury, and seeing all that was to be seen there before going on the next morning.

To me, who had done absolutely no travelling in all my life, nor seen any eminence (till I came to Lidmere) higher than Primrose Hill, every mile of our way towards the coast, and through scenery that was increasingly wild and

rugged, was full of attraction and interest. Colonel Graham was much amused at my astonished and rapturous exclamations, repeated nearly every five minutes, while his poor wife, sitting far back in her corner, looked at nothing, and seemed to wonder how anybody could admire enthusiastically a world from which her Evelyn had been taken. The mourning mother had yielded passively to her devoted husband's wish that she should leave for awhile the scene of her bitter suffering; but she was a mourning mother still, and had not forgiven her Heavenly Father for claiming from her the sweet flower He had lent for a little season.

When I gazed at her set, white face, and eyes that expressed unconsciously vast depths of hidden sadness, I was literally ashamed of having dignified any sentimental worry of my own by the name

of trouble, and I believed I had been brought into this closer companionship with one who had a legitimate cause for weeping, that I might learn not to shed idle tears.

Long before reaching our final destination, I got glimpses of blue water, and more than glimpses of soft purple mountains in the distance melting into a still darker purple sky. But the wide, open, boundless sea was yet to be revealed to me, and I yearned to find myself alone upon a quiet sandy shore—such as my guide-book was teaching me to expect at Towyn—with an intensity that gathered strength as the sweet, mild, April day declined.

At about five o'clock, after passing through a succession of low dark tunnels, each of which brought us out into what looked like a swamp of yellow sand, with a

world of barren fields, ending in dusky mountains on one side, and a waste of waters, bounded by low-lying hills, on the other, we were deposited on a rude, shaky platform, enjoying precisely the same view I have just described, and told that here was Towyn.

“Where?” very pertinently asked Colonel Graham, staring ruefully in every direction, while his tired wife and myself took our seats patiently on the luggage, and waited to see if Towyn would arise from the barren fields, or from the sand-streaked, dismal-looking waters.

“Oh! you’ll be there in no time, sir,” said a very jolly Welsh porter, who had been surveying our whole party, and especially our luggage, with an amused curiosity. “It’s over there” (pointing across the barren fields), “just at the foot of those tall hills, or mountains, as they’re mostly called, and

an uncommon healthy place it is, too. You'll all have the finest appetites before you've been here a week, and the ladies will be looking, I'm thinking, a deal brighter than they are looking now."

"Well, that may be, my man," said the Colonel, highly entertained by the primitive Welshman, and his cheering prophecy; "but, in the meanwhile, we should like to get to Towyn, and judge for ourselves of its salubrity. Can we have a conveyance at once?"

The man grinned, and winked at a fellow-porter, who was lounging against the side of the platform, and looking as if he had done nothing for half a year, and expected to have nothing to do for double that time to come.

"Why, no, sir, not exactly," was the reply, "unless you'd happened to have ordered one a couple of days in advance

from the 'Aberdovey Arms,' and even then it might have been out with parties on a tour. But, bless your hearts, 'tain't a quarter of an hour's walk, and you'll see the town as soon as ever you get across that wooden bridge yonder. Me and my mate we'll follow with your luggage, if you and the ladies will walk straight ahead. The 'Aberdovey Arms,' a first-rate hotel, sir, is at the end of the street, and there'll be lodgings in plenty, if you're wanting them by-and-by. The town, and the beach too, for that matter, are about full on 'em."

So it seemed that, unless we waited on that weird platform for another train to take us on to more civilized regions (if the little principality contained such), we had no choice but to find our own way to the hidden, or buried, or mythical Towyn, whose attractions we began to fear we had taken too much on trust.

Giving his arm to his pale wife, and bidding me keep close in the rear, the Colonel at length moved on in the direction indicated, and having crossed a bridge (that shook and creaked under our footsteps) spanning a piece of muddy water, we did come in sight of a small nest of scattered buildings, with a church in their midst, and the dusky mountains forming a grand and stately amphitheatre around them.

“Well, thank goodness,” exclaimed the Colonel, “there is our Ultima Thule at last, and a very original place it must be. I hope, Miss Newton”—smiling back at me—“you are beginning to fall in love with it.”

“That I did,” I answered eagerly, “before I had even had a glimpse of it. Those mountains were a sufficient guarantee for its attractiveness. I feel quite sure that,

whatever may be the case as regards you and dear Mrs. Graham, *I* shall love Towyn."

There was nothing very picturesque in the long, straggling street we had to walk through to get to the one hotel the place boasted, but arrived there we found very fair accommodation, and the Colonel decided at once on taking beds at the "Aberdovey Arms" for the night, and deferring a lodging-hunt till the next morning.

Having ascertained that the coast was at least half a mile from the village (for to call Towyn anything *but* a village was ridiculous), I begged to have a biscuit and a glass of wine instead of waiting for tea, as we had partaken plentifully of sandwiches on our journey, and to be allowed to find my way down to the sea while daylight lasted.

“As you please, you very romantic young lady,” said the Colonel, who had been trying, with shawls and wraps, to make of a most untempting-looking horse-hair sofa a possible resting-place for his wife; “but don’t get lost or overtaken by the tide in the first flush of your enthusiasm about the big fish-pond you are going to contemplate. I believe there will be a young moon to light you home, and remember I shall order supper for eight o’clock, as Mary and I will only have a cup of tea now.”

Mrs. Graham said I must be crazy to want to start off for a long walk just as I had arrived, but I was not to be discouraged by any opinions concerning my sanity, and after drinking my glass of wine I took my biscuits in my hand, and set forth in very elated and excited spirits.

My way led down a very monotonous

road, with a few houses standing in the barren fields on either side, and long reaches of desolate sandy country between these questionable dwellings. But for the grand and towering mountains, the whole landscape would have been dreary in the extreme. Even as it was, it was strangely weird and ghost-like in the approaching twilight, and though I enjoyed it from its novelty and from some mysterious affinity it seemed to have to my present state of mind, I could not help feeling that to live altogether here, Summer and Winter, would be to me a death in life, that the gloom and the eeriness would eat into my heart, and wither up, by degrees, all its cheerful and hopeful properties.

But a sudden bend in my dismal road brought me face to face with a lonely, majestic, dark blue, rolling sea, and then I held my breath, hurried on as if my feet

had been abruptly turned into small steam engines, and felt that I could never feel enough how wonderful and glorious it was.

I think the utter solitude of that wild beach was one of its chief attractions to me on that dim April evening. There was not a human creature to be seen anywhere. I had the land, the sky, the sea absolutely to myself, and I sat down on a sandy hillock under a reedy platform, with such a sense of nature's infinitude and of man's littleness weighing on my awed spirit, that it was almost a terror to me.

The tide was coming in fast, and its plaintive murmur, when my first emotion began to subside, was delicious and soothing beyond words. Under its influence, the power of thinking of nearly everything in the wide universe seemed miraculously bestowed upon me. I thought of all my

past life with its unbroken sameness and repose, with its quiet home duties and its faint tinge of carefully concealed poetry that shone as a halo round the whole, and kept me content in the midst of dulness and loneliness. Then I thought of my first coming to Lidmere, and of the marvellous revelation that the unexpected beauty of the country had been to me, and then of the friends I had made, of Gilbert Radcliff and his frank and openly expressed interest in the daughter of a poor physician, who had nothing to distinguish her that any other masculine eyes till then had seen. I did not forget either, in this my retrospective view, how near I had been to feeling a special interest in him, saved only, as I believed, by that vein of common sense in my organization which led me to discover the great gulf that divided us socially, and to be

persuaded that his mother would view it with even keener eyes than mine.

And then came, in its turn, after a pleasant, tender pause over Mildred and her childlike affection for me, the latest and strongest interest my life had ever known. But how about my vaunted common-sense and its warnings here? Whither had flown my judgment, my wisdom, my quick discernment when I suffered my heart to go after a stranger, and for a winning face and a beguiling voice bartered the sweet liberty and peace of mind I had hitherto so dearly prized?

I had no answer to my own stern questions, and the rolling and splashing waves, though I listened to them between my meditations, had no answer either. One thing only was quite clear to my mind, and had been even startlingly clear since the moment when Gilbert Radcliff asked

me to be his wife—I loved Heber Marsden with a love that had ceased to be calculating, with a love that was more than willing to risk all future discoveries of unfitness and uncongeniality, with a love that, were he poorer than the poorest, faultier than the faultiest, would incline me to put my hand in his and to say, believing in his equal love for me—

“Let us walk through life together, sharing all its joys, and dividing all its pains.”

This was the plain, unvarnished truth, and the waves knew it, and the yellow-ribbed sand at my feet. But their knowledge extended not, unhappily, one whit beyond mine. They could not tell me, these talking, singing breakers, whether in all this mortal life I should ever see my love again; they could not tell me

whether he had in him the constancy and tenacity of purpose that I believed I had in myself; they could not even show me the quality of his love, nor satisfy my hungry heart that it was other than the fleeting fancy of a highly imaginative man.

“But if all else fails, how beautiful the world is!” I thought, in my returning consciousness of the glorious majesty of the scene before me, and being wrought up to that state of excitement in which one emotion succeeds another with startling rapidity. “How beautiful the world is, and how much better in this world of beauty to be good and true and noble than to seek for individual happiness, and to faint by the wayside if it is denied us!”

Should I deal less faithfully with my-

self than I had so recently dealt with the man whose helper I had refused to become?

But the young moon Colonel Graham had led me to expect was already shining palely down from a dark grey sky, and, gathering a shawl I had brought closely round me, I struggled to my feet, gave a last lingering, loving look over the vast expanse of waters, and turned slowly to go. As I did this, the figure of a man seated a few yards behind my vacated mound of sand instantly caught my sight, and in some terror I was hastening to pass it quickly, when it arose and approached my side, a voice saying, in calm, reassuring tones, before I had time to question its right to address me—

“I hope your first view of the grand, unresting sea has not disappointed your anticipations, Miss Newton? But it is late

now. Will you not accept the support
of my arm in your walk back to your
friends ?”

CHAPTER III.

THE MAN WHO STARTLED ME BY THE SEA.

MY heart was beating so fast and thickly, partly from the fear which Heber Marsden's voice had dispelled, and partly from the astounding fact of his presence in this spot and at this hour, that I had literally no power to speak as I took the arm he offered, and waited for some explanation from him.

“You are surprised,” he said—and his voice had that dangerous tenderness which had already done its work only too surely—“and, I am afraid, more startled than I had counted on your being, at my sudden

apparition ; but, do you know, I planned this a few days after our first meeting. I always intended being near you when you had your first view of the sea. At your father's dinner-table that evening when he told you of the Grahams wishing you to go with them to the seaside, I knew I should be of the party, having promised the Colonel, wherever they went, to spend the first week or ten days with them. I would not mention it, lest it should frighten you from accepting their invitation, or deter your father from urging you to go ; and I made our friends keep silence too. For all this you must forgive me now, in return for my forgiving you, as I scarcely know how to do, for thinking I could have left Lidmere without seeing you, had I not meant joining you immediately here."

My heart had quieted from its painful

throbbing by this time, and was singing to itself a low, sweet tune, but because I was so conscious of the vast content and happiness that had descended upon me and my weariness like a silver-lined cloud, I chose to put on the semblance of the most careless and indifferent mood, which I have no doubt deceived him about as much as a child deceives its mother when it hides its silly head and plays at bo-peep.

"I suspect you are rather fond of mysteries and surprises," I said, as though I had no personal interest whatever in all he had been telling me. "You and Mildred would suit each other exactly as to that—but," in a still airier tone, "what do you think of Towyn?"

He laughed lightly and gladly, as he tried to get a glimpse of my face, which I was keeping turned from him as much as I conveniently could.

“That question is so characteristic of your sweet serene self that can never be betrayed into ungraceful demonstration of any kind,” he said, “that I cannot quarrel with it, though I might have looked for inquiries of a less prosaic and abstract nature. I only arrived this afternoon—an hour or two in advance of yourselves—and as yet I have discovered nothing beyond the obvious fact that Towyn must have been made when all the materials employed in the creation of the world were used up, and the refuge and chips alone remained. But I think *we* shall manage to enjoy it,” he added, emphasizing the pronoun, and drawing my arm closer within his own. “Life has not many holidays, and I have come down here with the firm, reckless determination to make this next fortnight an holiday for you and me.”

The word reckless jarred on me a little,

but I put it aside, in the completeness of my satisfaction, and said I was fascinated with what I had seen of Towyn, and hoped to make the best of my time. I still spoke in a quiet, everyday tone, ignoring, or intending to ignore, my companion's excited gladness and his unscrupulous coupling together of our pleasures and interests. But nothing I could do or leave undone, say or leave unsaid, had any power, apparently, to quench the buoyant spirits he had brought with him to Towyn. He talked about the mountains, about the sea, about the soft, pale moon that was lighting our homeward steps, with the enthusiasm of an emancipated and romantic school-boy rather than with the sober discrimination of a full-grown, sensible man. He seemed to me to have been lifted by some invisible machinery into the clouds and to have no wish or ability to come

down to the solid earth again. I was half frightened and wholly puzzled at the very unusual exuberance of his spirits, the whole being mixed with a tenderness and a caressingness towards myself (manifested by little, involuntarily pressures of my arm, and by occasional strokings of my ungloved hand) that had something almost pathetic in them, as they seemed less to belong to the strange mental condition I have described, than to be the spasmodic expression of a totally opposite state of feeling in the background.

As we approached the end of our lonely walk—a walk that had possessed for me a charm and a sweetness I could never put into words—Heber Marsden stopped abruptly, and in a tone of quite child-like pleading, said,

“Do you know you have not once told me you are glad to see me. You would

not grudge me this little comfort if *all* my heart were laid bare to you to-night. You see its gladness and joyousness, which are real, and owe their origin to my being here with you, and knowing that for two happy weeks at least I shall have you to myself and share in whatever pleasures your novel experiences may bring to you ; but you don't see below the surface where the waters are sorely ruffled and unquiet, and I don't want you to do so yet—only say, because you are a tender, pitiful woman, that you are glad I have come to you now."

Certainly this man was a strange wooer, if wooing this was meant to be ; but he needed comfort from some hidden cause, and my sympathy—was it sympathy alone?—prompted me to say, below my breath,

" Don't you know whether I am glad or not ? Must you have spoken words ?"

"No," he replied, with passionate earnestness, and gathering my two hands with a sort of rightful proprietorship into his own; "I will be generous and claim no more as yet. So let us be happy, my Constance, with the dear suggestive name, as long as we can, and without giving the dim future a single unnecessary thought. Remember, this is our life's holiday—who knows whether we shall ever have another?—and it is ours to profit by and enjoy to its supreme limit of bestowing."

I was much too excited, too touched, too intoxicated with the wild berry wine my thirsty lips were quaffing, to weigh his words, or note that they embodied something—call it recklessness, as he had called it himself—that was not only mysterious to me, but suggestive of concealed facts, that I ought to have inquired into before acquiescing, even tacitly, in the re-

lations between us which every word and every tender look of Heber's now implied.

When we went in at last, I shrank and winced under Colonel Graham's observant and laughing eye.

"You must not scold me, Miss Newton," he said, "for keeping that tyrannical fellow's secret. He threatened slow poison and all sorts of deadly revenges if I betrayed him by word or sign. Mary thought it very wrong, and was most averse to becoming a party to it; but I fancy the doctor played her an extra tune on the organ, and got over her in this way. Now come and have some supper—it has been waiting quite half an hour—and afterwards you must tell us how you liked the sea, and how this bold young man revealed himself to you, and how he won your pardon for his shabby trick, and all

about it. Your eyes are looking too bright to suggest an idea of fatigue such as we old people are oppressed with ; but Mary has had a little sleep, and will be enough refreshed after supper to listen with interest to the first chapter of your adventures at Towyn.

But I was not in a chattering humour, and dear Mrs. Graham, having a woman's intuition concerning the unexpressed feelings of a fellow-woman, ordered me off to bed as soon as I had eaten what I could, promising for me that I should be amusing and instructive to any reasonable extent on the morrow. She came to the door of my room with me herself, the gentlemen having gone out to smoke, and kissing me affectionately, said—

“You dear, transparent child! nobody could look into your face to-night and not shrewdly guess that your life's story has

begun. I don't know whether I can rejoice with you, though Heber Marsden is a man of gentle and refined nature, and loves you as the apple of his eye, as poets and dreamers love, with imagination reigning over and colouring their every heart throb. But oh, Constance, darling," and here she kissed me fondly again, leaving scorching tears upon my cheek, "life has to women such infinite possibilities of suffering, to married women especially, that had I a daughter grown up, I think I would prefer her choosing a spinster's unloved and lonely destiny to giving her to the best husband that was ever born into our hard world. The more objects we have to enshrine in our weak hearts, the deeper are the gulfs of anguish into which we may be drawn. This is a poor sort of congratulation, my dear," she added, with a pathetic attempt to smile, as

she stroked my hot cheek ; “ but you are sure that I *wish* you all happiness, and it may be yours, if you love in moderation, and if ”—a little gasping pause, and then a rapid ending—“ if God does not give you children, and when they have become part of yourself, the life of your life, take them from you again one by one.”

It was not often that this poor stricken woman indulged in open expressions of bitterness and rebellion now ; she was acquiring a sort of dumb submission to her bereavement, that we, who loved and watched her, hoped would become a Christian resignation in time ; but the sight of my unquestioning gladness in the dawning of a strong human love, had apparently stirred the only partially slumbering waters of her recent sorrow, and out of these hidden depths she had spoken.

And to all I only said, as I kissed her

thin, white cheek, in a full bestowal of womanly sympathy,

“At least, dear, you have not missed a wife’s crown of glory and of happiness, that of blessing her husband, and of retaining his love. I shall be more than content if I can wear such a crown to the end of my married days.”

She sighed softly as she left me then, and I know she was thinking that I spoke ignorantly, without any true perception of what lay beyond the threshold of the golden gates I had just entered.

Perhaps it was so ; but the present prospect was one of dazzling fairness, and I thought I was justified in concentrating all my interest in this, and in looking neither to the past nor to the future with curious and inquiring eyes.

CHAPTER IV.

OUR SUMMER HOLIDAY.

THERE is nothing much less easy to chronicle than mere human happiness—such intense and almost unbroken happiness as was mine during the ensuing fortnight. Of course I knew perfectly *why* I was happy, but the reader is equally well informed on that important point, and the why being of so very personal a nature, I could not write at large of it without incurring the charge of egotism and vanity.

Let me just say, I was having my day, my day of feasting at life's choicest ban-

quet (for love's young dream is this, however unwholesome the viands partaken of may be); my day of wandering unchecked in a world all strewn with flowers; my day of trust and confidence, and hope in everything created, just because I was loved supremely, and I trusted, and confided, and hoped in the man who loved me.

Heber and myself were not a great deal alone together—at least we did not make any lengthy excursions alone; but our friends were very good in keeping always at a safe distance, behind or before us, in our delightful exploring walks, and in giving us frequent opportunities, while they rested on their camp-stools or on a friendly stile, of strolling on, deep in our lover's talk, as far as we cared to go.

And then, on our finest days, there were distant lakes to be visited, distant mountains to be ascended, quaint old towns, in-

cluding Dolgelly, Barmouth, and Harlech, to be seen ; and sometimes our conveyances to these places were of the rudest and most incommodious description, jolting and bumping us along the rutty valleys we had to traverse, in such a ludicrous fashion that we young people had an admirable excuse for getting out and using our own feet.

But oh, how full of interest, how delicious, how ever memorable to me these wild jaunts, in that wildest of wild places, were ! It was April weather (though very mild for the season), and our frequent sudden drenchings, our rushes for shelter into impossible coverts under the hills, our half drowned and limp appearance when the pitiless storms were over, and the bright sun, and perhaps a gorgeous rainbow, laughed down upon us from a clear blue sky—all these accidents were pro-

ductive, to Heber and myself, of a mirth and enjoyment that were childish in their extent and unweariedness, but of which, in our abandonment of ourselves to the novel delights of the passing hour, we were never in the least ashamed. He had said that this was to be our life's holiday, and we certainly made it such, without a question as to our right to all and everything of happiness and pleasure it could confer.

I ought, perhaps, to mention here that we neither of us spoke of the future, not even of that future which I thought must be so close at hand, when Heber would go boldly to my father, tell him we loved each other, and ask his permission to our marrying, and getting on as best we could. Of course it was not for me to allude to this, and I wondered occasionally, and for a little while, that he was so silent on the point. Once only he mentioned care-

lessly, or with apparent carelessness, that his recent visit to London had been connected with something threatening loss of property, but he had added, laughing lightly—

“ If it goes, it goes, and I must begin to grind at physic and limb-setting again. It will be an odious necessity to me, for I do love leisure and liberty, as few men love them ; but you know there is a proverb which advises—‘ of two evils choose the least ;’ and even hard work is a lesser evil than living in a smoky cottage at thirty pounds a year, and eating cold shoulder of mutton five days out of the seven.”

His tone was a jesting one, but I strongly suspected he was speaking the plain truth, and, laughing and blushing a little, I had replied—

“ Neither of the necessities you have named would have any terror for me. The

cottage chimneys could be kept swept, and the cold shoulder could be cooked up daintily, and with variations, every day. What an epicure you are, Dr. Marsden."

"And what a little innocent goose you are!" he had retorted, getting hold of my hand, and directing my attention to its whiteness and delicacy. "Do you think *this* was ever made to hack away at bony meat, or to do any sort of work out of a drawing-room, that drawing-room being elegantly furnished, too, and bright with hot-house flowers? My sweetest Constance, I had always reckoned on your teaching *me* to be practical, and lo! I have become the teacher."

Well, this was our one only reference to the future, and, vague as it was, you may be sure it did not encourage me to lead up to a second. What did it matter? We were together, and radiantly happy now.

I had boundless faith, not merely in the love, but in the wisdom and discretion of Heber Marsden ; and, apart from this, who ever strains his neck and his eyesight to gaze out of his fool's paradise into a work-a-day world beyond ?

We had, amongst our minor advantages, charming lodgings in the village with some primitive old maidens (Welsh, of course), who read the daily papers greedily, were intelligent and zealous politicians, and warmly interested in everything going on in civilized England, as we might be in the social and religious life of the moon's inhabitants, could their newspapers be wafted down to us. Dr. Marsden, however, had preferred remaining at the "Aberdovey Arms," which was close to our more home-like "Plas-Meenî ;" and it struck me now and then, though he had called my practical tendencies in question, that, for a man

threatened with a loss of money, and hating work, this was a little extravagance he might have avoided.

I think Mrs. Graham first suggested the idea to me, as I was certainly not quick to discover spots on my sun ; but that dear woman seemed, strangely enough, to be acquiring an intensely watchful mood as regarded me and my future prospects. Possibly the torn tendrils of her woman's heart were beginning to reach out yearningly for a new object of love and anxiety—some women *must* have anxiety mixed with their strongest affections to give them a flavour ; and I, being near at hand, and in a critical phase of my life, these tendrils were taking fast and protecting hold of me.

I know, at least, that, in spite of her regard and admiration for her old friend, Dr. Marsden, she believed I was taking a

leap in the dark, and would fain have held me back for awhile from staking my whole life upon this one venture, if she could.

As regarded herself, we could not perceive that she made much progress in resignation or cheerfulness, though she acquiesced, with a sweet, meek patience, in all her devoted husband's efforts to rouse and interest and brighten her. We soon, however, discovered that she liked an opportunity of talking, when none of us were by, to our agreeable and social landladies, and we were scarcely surprised to learn further that she never wearied of telling them every detail connected with the loss of her precious Evelyn. They were new hearers, new sympathisers, new channels for the outpouring of that passionate sorrow and despair which, for fear of wearying us, she had tried to crush

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down into the recesses of her aching heart, and which had naturally acquired strength from such a treatment.

Upon the whole, Colonel Graham was of opinion that it was better for his wife to be here than at home, and he decided upon remaining in our present quarters—earnestly entreating me to remain also—till quite the middle of Summer. I wrote to ask my father how much longer he could spare me (mentioning, in as casual a manner as possible, that Dr. Marsden was with us now, but would be returning to Abbegates shortly), and in his reply he said I might stay just as long as I pleased, and while I could be of any help or comfort to my friends. The servants managed very well, he added, and for himself, though he could not deny that he missed me, he was much too busy with Spring epidemics to be dull or depressed, sleep generally overtak-

ing him in five minutes after he had eaten his dinner.

So I agreed to remain at Plas-Meeni for at least another month, by which time I had not the shadow of a doubt that my earthly destiny would be fixed, as far as an openly-acknowledged engagement with Heber Marsden could fix it. I knew that my dear father would not be enchanted at this marriage for me, that he would probably never cease to regret my rejection of Gilbert Radcliff, but I was equally certain that he would not oppose what I assured him would conduce to my happiness; and by a wondrous fatuity, which I suppose belongs exclusively to people in love, I never thought of Heber's pecuniary losses, should these be confirmed, as an obstacle in the way of our union. If the subject crossed my mind at all, I chose either to regard the matter hopefully, to believe it

was but the threat of a misfortune wholly unlikely to happen, or I concluded that he would resume his profession, and be very much the happier man for so doing. Neither did the fact of my own want of a marriage portion trouble me greatly. I suspected that my father would give me a few hundreds to start with (for years ago he had been putting by a small sum from time to time with this object in view), and I was also aware that at his death, which I prayed might be at the most distant date conceivable, I should have a thousand pounds that had been bequeathed to me by my mother, with a life interest in it for her husband which he had never touched, but was allowing to accumulate for me. This was, that, in case of my never marrying, I might, on being left alone in the world, have sufficient for my support without the necessity of going amongst

strangers to earn my daily bread for myself.

My dear, dear father ! how good he always was to me, how content to live frugally and drive a vehicle that most doctors, with half his experience and reputation, would have been ashamed to own, that his unworthy and often thankless daughter might be benefited and enriched, through his self-sacrifice, by-and-by.

I have not said much hitherto of my continued delight in the glorious sea I had so near at hand, but the truth is it was not near enough to make very frequent visits to it convenient, and when I did go it was usually in the early mornings, before Heber joined our party, or anyone but myself dreamt of being out.

I had more than once asked him to walk down with me to the shore, when a stroll by our two selves had been in question, but he always said it was too bleak, or too

windy, or that the monotony of it affected his spirits—in short, he did not like the wild, weird beach at Towyn, and so we mostly wandered up the pretty sunny valleys instead, where there was nothing in the outward prospect to inspire gloomy thoughts, and where the solitude was quite as complete.

One morning, however, when Heber made his first appearance, he suggested to me a walk by the sea in the evening. We were going on rather a lengthy expedition during the day, but we should be home, he said, quite in time for this. I replied that I should enjoy it excessively, and then I noticed that he was under a cloud of some kind, though he made great efforts not to show it, and was even more talkative and vivacious than usual.

We had a charming excursion, travelling on a wonderful railway that took us up

and up till we were level with the highest mountains, and then in such a curious and continuous zigzag that our little toy-train described the shape of the letter S, running on four curves at the same time, our destination being the valley of Festiniog, one of the loveliest and most remarkable specimens of wild and picturesque scenery to be found in the whole of Wales. We did not go on into the town, which is only noted for its slate quarries, but amused ourselves in exploring as much as we could of this exquisite valley, and in partaking of the cold refreshments we had brought with us. Heber's spirits were, as I have said, even unusually brilliant on the surface, and they became more so as the scenery warmed his ever excitable imagination, and as the social element amongst our little party developed into a charming gaiety in which even Mrs. Graham, to some extent, shared.

But for all this, *I* knew, through love's unerring intuition, I suppose, that he had something special weighing on his mind, and I longed for evening, and our walk together, when perhaps he would confide to me his trouble.

If only it was not that his holiday had expired, that he was going to leave me in the midst of our golden days, I fancied I could bear anything; but I had drunk so eagerly at all the springs of gladness within my reach of late, I had entered triumphantly upon so utterly new a life, I had put my old life of monotonous drudgery, unblessed by love of this sort, so entirely in the background, that I shrank, with a dread that was both cowardly and childish, from the even temporary withdrawal of that presence which had made my new world so full of glory and of sweetness to me.

Dear reader, you will think I was mad at this time, and I am inclined to hold the same opinion myself—but I believe it is no uncommon thing for women who are reputed wise, and who, in general matters, may deserve the reputation, to be betrayed into one supreme act of folly or weakness, at some period of their lives, just to teach them that there is no height from which humanity is not liable to fall.

* * * * *

We were sitting side by side, and hand fast locked in hand, in the same spot where I had sat alone the first evening of my visit to that solemn sea. We had both been gazing silently over the wide expanse of waters, and though I longed to speak and question, I was waiting, with what patience I could command, for Heber to be the speaker, and to claim the sympathy he

must have known I was more than ready to bestow.

And at last he did say, in a quiet, weary voice, the day's excitement having all faded out now—

“My darling, I asked you to come here to-night because my heart is oppressed, and this cold, drear scene is just in accordance with my state of mind. Constance, I have to leave you at once; our Summer holiday is at an end, and in proportion as I have enjoyed and revelled in every passing hour with you and your precious love to gladden me, so will my desolation be when miles and miles divide us. I must, however, go to London to-morrow night at latest. My affairs are looking bad—worse than I ever calculated on; and after I have seen into these, I must return to Lidmere, and finish my visit at Abbeygates. My good cousins may be of important use to

me if I have to begin my life over again. I shall write to you, my dearest ; I shall tell you everything, and you must write to me—often, Constance ; not grudgingly, or reservedly, for I shall miss you cruelly, and every hour will be an hour of weariness without you. I wish you were returning to Lidmere sooner. Goodness only knows in what part of the world I may be when you do come back ; but nothing can finally separate us, loving and trusting each other as we do. My own darling, your hand is trembling, and has turned quite cold. You are sorry to lose me, Constance ?”

Sorry to lose him ! I wondered in that moment whether men ever did love with the utter abandonment that women bring into their supreme affections, but I only said, as quietly as he had spoken—

“Yes, I shall be sorry to lose you,

especially as you seem so doubtful as to the time and place of our meeting again. How long do you *expect* to stay at Abbey-gates after your business in London is finished?"

"I don't know," he replied, still in the same weary tone, and staring straight before him at the creamy waves which were almost kissing our feet. "I promised my cousins a three months' visit, but there is no knowing what I may have to do elsewhere long before that time is up. Oh, how I shall abhor going again into drugs and pulse-feeling, and all the odious machinery connected with the hateful trade I had got rid of!" he added, setting his teeth hard, and looking as I had never seen him look. "Constance, my good, serene angel, who can educe poetry out of the merest drudgery of common daily life, you may think me lazy, and wanting in energy

and courage, but it is not this—it is the *kind* of work I loathe. I am so miserably dependent on outward things. If my occupation, my associates, my general surroundings are uncongenial to me, I literally faint under the burden of life. You cannot comprehend this ; you are differently made ; you have a better balanced mind, just the mind, my love, that would have been like cool waters to my hot and feverish spirit when my dark moods overtake me. Oh, my Constance, my darling, the only woman who has ever come up to my ideal of women, why cannot we sail away together over that dim sea to some fairy island in the nether world, where professions and incomes are ignored, and where we could live a perfect life, wholly for each other ?”

Wild and fanciful as these words were, they seemed to come naturally from him then ; but I was more struck by one little

syllable which had preceded them, the "would" where the "will" should have been, unless he meant to imply that his pecuniary losses and dislike to work might become, or *had* become already, serious obstacles to our ultimate union. My throat had been hot and dry, and my hands, as he had discovered, icy cold under the influence of the many agitating thoughts his first announcement had suggested; but here was something to clutch at my heart with a grip so merciless that I might well doubt whether its quickened pulses would ever be lulled to a healthy measure again.

I sat quite still for a minute or two, and then, as he did not speak or even turn his face towards me, I said—

"It is not for me to judge you for shrinking from work, as you do, though I cannot think the work my dear father so

lovingly and honestly performs, lacking in either dignity or interest. But if your dislike to it is really unconquerable, you have still the resource of music. You once hinted that you might take up this."

I wanted to compel from him a definite statement of what he did intend doing, and especially of how certainly or how doubtfully he associated me with his coming life.

"My darling," he replied, making a grimace of strong revolt—"you who know what music is to me may conceive how averse I must be to think seriously of adopting such a desperate alternative. But I quite recognise the fact that *something* has to be done, that my life of self-pleasing and calm dreaming leisure has come, like this delicious holiday of ours, to an end. Constance, I cannot think soberly of the future to-night. My whole

mind is upset and bewildered. I have the anguish of our parting in the foreground of all my dreary reflections, with your sorrow, my love, in this anticipation, added to my own. But you must trust me and be patient—you have a gentle, patient nature, my darling, just the nature that I reverence and delight in. Constance, you know our hearts are so knit together that we cannot for ever live apart. Fate may be hard and trying, but we shall win it yet to smile upon us. Will you trust, love?—will you wait?”

“Indeed I will, to the very utmost limit,” I said earnestly, as that pitiless grip on my heart loosened, and I began to breathe a little freely again. “What, after all, is waiting where trust and faith are absolute? But I have had a blow to-night, dear,” I added, “and my head and my heart ache together. Let us go home.”

I was, in truth, so weary in body as well as in mind that I felt a positive necessity for rest and exemption from present excitement.

He lifted me gently up (Heber Marsden's gentleness and tenderness with women were his most subtle attractions), took my arm protectingly within his own, and spoke only loving and soothing words to me during all our walk to the village. He did love me at that time, poor Heber! with a very profound and sincere affection, though perhaps Mrs. Graham was right when she said that imagination was its dominant element.

And, alas! how I loved *him* might be guessed at by the sore and bitter trouble it was to me to say good-bye to him on the morrow—a cold, rainy, sunless day, seeming to belong to a different world from the world of light and gladness I had dwelt in lately.

But it was only earth and sky mourning with me—with him, too, he said, as he gave me a last, lingering, yearning kiss, and whispered tenderly,

“My own Constance, this is as the bitterness of death to me; but I shall hold to your generous promise to trust and wait to the utmost limit.”

Then he went; and for me thenceforth, missing him ever through the long and brightening Spring days, it was truly—

“The dreary, dreary moorland,
The barren, barren shore.”

CHAPTER V.

DAYS OF ANXIOUS WAITING.

IT was quite a week before I had a line from Heber, and then he wrote briefly and in evident perplexity and distress of mind. He had lost nearly everything, through that luckless investment in foreign stock, and the little that remained would be quite insufficient, he said, either to give him the most paltry income, if put out at safe interest, or to purchase for him a doctor's practice in the most obscure of country localities. He meant to go down to Lidmere immediately, as he saw no

chance for himself but in borrowing a considerable sum from his well-to-do relatives there.

He did not explain what he meant to do with this sum, should he succeed in borrowing it, but I concluded, as did Colonel Graham, that he would buy a practice, and establish himself at once as a country doctor again. Doubtless he had reflected more soberly upon the matter since he had been away from me, and had wisely resolved to meet his ill fortune with a brave face, as every man, under like circumstances, would be expected to do.

So my drooping spirits revived to some extent, and I tried to make myself both agreeable and useful to the friends who had been only too indulgent to me while I wore the willow for my lost sweetheart, and refused to let even the bright sunshine or the Summer air, or sea, or sky, or

any other delightful thing, in any degree comfort me.

But being a little comforted now, the days went by on swifter wings, and I took a mild pleasure in our walks and excursions, also in long talks with Mrs. Graham in the sweet Spring twilights, while her husband smoked and ruminated in the pretty garden of our lodging, and, in spite of all his devotedness to his Mary, was relieved, I can well imagine, at being "off duty" for a brief season. For though that dear woman was better in many respects, she was very much of a weeping Niobe and a mourning Rachel still, and the best of men weary of low, sad tones and pensive faces, as they do of bodily ailments and the natural egotism these entail. And, for her part, she liked being alone with me, and was always ready to listen with warm interest to as much as I was inclined to

confide to her of my hopes and fears, in return for the sympathy I never failed to give when she was constrained, from the overflowing of some inward spring of bitterness or sorrow, to talk of her lost darlings.

Heber did not write again (though I had answered his first letter on four sheets of note-paper) till he was at Abbeygates, and holding, as he said, daily consultations with his admirable, if simple, cousins, as to what was best and wisest for him to do.

“I have not told them yet,” he added, “what *you* are to me, my darling, though, of course, Penelope, the tender and romantic, guesses the true state of the case ; but in my present circumstances they would both look upon our attachment as a complication of things in general, and would harass and torture me by solemn

shakes of their heads, and upward turnings of their eyes. Neither dare I even see your father, who did not approve of me when I had the means of offering you at least a modest home. Oh, my love, my heart is heavier than I can say, or than you would care to learn. I wander about the dear old garden we both delight in. It is a perfect paradise now, and I dream of you and of our delicious holiday, and wish impossible wishes, and form impossible plans. My cousins tell me that Mildred is coming home in June. How I should dread the advent of that gushing and overpowering } young person, if I thought I should still be here ; but this is wholly improbable. I *must* put my shoulder to the wheel in some way ; and Lidmere, though I cling to it weakly, has no field of action now for me."

There is a proverb which says, "To a

hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet ;” and it must have been on this principle that Heber’s letter kept me from actual starvation. There was certainly not enough nourishment in it to satisfy the hunger of my soul, but I devoured what I found, and made the best of it, reflecting that, to a man of poor Heber’s very sensitive nature and morbid temperament, the harass of pecuniary difficulties must be nearly maddening.

In a few days after the receipt of his letter came the following curiosity of English literature from Miss Penelope :—

“ MY VERY DEAR YOUNG FRIEND,

“ Having promised to write and tell you how everything was going on, I should have redeemed this promise before, if I had not known that Heber was with you in Wales, and that you ought to be

better acquainted with his affairs than myself. Alas! my dear young friend, I am afraid you will both have to prove that 'the course of true love never does run smooth,' which would be even sadder than it is, but for the fact that trials test the quality of affection, and that 'absence makes the heart grow fonder,' *vide* Shakespeare, or some other poet of his time—only I am no scholar, and my memory is getting bad.

"Well, my dear young friend, Heber is at Abbeygates now, and in a state of mind most distressing to Lucinda and myself, who are not skilled in dealing with masculine disorders, mental or bodily, from the obvious reason that we have had so little to do with the masculine sex all our lives. Once, you know, and for a short time, there was a *chance*—a very slight one, certainly—that it might have been otherwise

as regards myself ; but the hope faded, as so many earthly hopes do, and I have had a happy, quiet life, thank God ! as an unwedded woman.

“ But to return to our poor, unfortunate Heber. We do not know, in truth, how to advise him or what to do for him. Between ourselves, he wants to borrow a large sum of money from Lucinda and me ; but, besides that we fear he is not *very* prudent, we could only lend it by selling out of the funds, and reducing our incomes considerably. This would oblige us, not merely to deny ourselves, but to curtail our little *charities*, and we don't think we have a right to do it, even for one dear to us as Heber, who is the most affectionate creature imaginable, and so highly gifted that he ought to be able to make a fortune in half a dozen different ways, and would, if he loved work half as well as he loves

dreaming and getting into ecstatic states over his organ playing. Don't think, my dear young friend, that I am meaning to cast a shadow of reproach on him in saying this. None of us can help being born with peculiarities of nature, and all that our poor Heber wants is a wise, tender, and practical *wife*, who would be a sort of moral twig for him to hold by (I wish I could think of a better word than twig, but I cannot, without delaying my letter a post, and that is not worth while), when he is in danger of sinking. But to come to the pith of my lengthy epistle, my dear young friend—We are thinking whether it may not be possible, when Mildred returns, to borrow of her, through her guardian, the sum of money Heber requires to begin life anew upon. If this can be managed, and he will consent to buy a new practice with it, in some nice

country town as near Lidmere as may be, my sister and myself will furnish a house for him, and then, with the little he has left of his own, he can begin comfortably, and in a short time be ready for the beloved helpmate his heart has already chosen.

“In conclusion, let me say, my dear young friend, that I am watching zealously over your interests, for ever praising *you* to dear Lucinda, who, however, is quite alive to your worth, and *Heber* to your excellent father, when I see him, and when, as is not often the case, he has a moment to listen to me. Therefore, be hopeful and courageous, as regards the future. I quite believe that marriages are made in heaven, only I sometimes wonder why they left off making one that *seemed* to have been begun years and years ago. It was a slight beginning, certainly ;

but still I did think then, ah me ! that the foundation stone had at least been laid. These retrospective views try me a little even now, so, my dear young friend, you will excuse my adding more to day,

“ Ever yours in love and sympathy,

“ PENELOPE LAMB.”

This letter, with all its quaintness, gave me a fair amount of satisfaction, and helped me on pleasantly through another fortnight of quiet, monotonous days, amidst the changeless hills, the changeful skies, and my own hidden world, fashioned out of sunbeams, clouds, and rainbows of hope and promise.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. GRAHAM ON HUSBANDS AND WIVES.

IT was June at last, and still my companions did not talk of leaving their pleasant Welsh quarters, where Colonel Graham was convinced his wife had a far better chance of recovering her serenity of mind, than in the home where everything would recall her lost child to her. And if ever I spoke of returning first, they both protested so earnestly against it that I had no courage to oppose them, especially as my going would look like a weak hankering after the vicinity of Dr. Marsden.

Early in the month I received a letter from Mildred, but it was of too voluminous a nature to be transcribed at full on these pages. The most interesting part to me was her gossip about Gilbert, with whom, she said, she got on delightfully now, because she indulged him in his whim of talking incessantly of me, and of making her tell him, over and over again, how good I had been to her. He had declined going to the fancy ball as the "country heart" to be broken by Lady Clara Vere de Vere, but had taken, to please his mother, the character of a knight of King Arthur's Round Table—Geraint, Mildred thought it was—and had been immensely admired in it. Then she added that she had received two or three serious offers from foreign fortune-hunters, but had declined them all, *without* thanks, and that she believed, ridiculous as it was, that

Mrs. Radcliff still cherished the hope that, sooner or later, Gilbert would woo and win her. "If he wooed me," wrote Mildred, in her blunt style, "he certainly would not win me, while his whole heart (and I know it is a good, true heart, my icy Constance) remains yours. What a goose you are, *entre nous*, not to waive social distinctions, and all such mere shadows, and take the goods the gods provide you!"

Finally, she told me they were coming home in a week or ten days, and that she hoped I should be in Lidmere to welcome her.

It was a bright, affectionate, amusing letter, and yet, for some unexplainable reason (anyhow, I never admitted the explanation), it lay like a dead weight upon my heart for many days after I had received it. Of course there was no chance of my

being at Lidmere to welcome her. I knew that my father wished me to stay at Towyn as long as the Grahams stayed. Probably he had his own private reasons for this, apart from any desire to oblige my kind and hospitable friends. Anyhow, as my return was encouraged by no one, not even by Heber, because he said that our constant meeting would be awkward until he could speak openly to my father, I had to abandon all thought of returning, and to content myself, as well as I could, in waiting the issue of events in the solitude of that Welsh village, which still seemed to us all a perfect Ultima Thule.

Once, between the time I have just written of—the time immediately preceding Mildred's coming back to Abbey-gates—and the time I am going to write of—after she had been home several weeks—I had one short but exceedingly loving

epistle from Heber. In it he said he was very hopeful about getting the sum of money he wanted from Mildred's guardian, and with this he was sure he could do *something* that would set him up again in the world, and enable him, with a brave face, to ask me of my father. He must be in a position, he added, to give his Constance a few of the refinements of life, if he could not give her its luxuries. It would break his heart, and wholly unfit him for work of any kind, to see her in a stuffy little house, and to know that she spent half her mornings in the kitchen, operating with her white, dainty hands upon that impracticable and repulsive cold shoulder.

Mrs. Graham and myself had both laughed over this, and she had said, looking at me, I thought, somewhat pitifully, as indeed she often did now—

“How very imperfectly men, especially such men as Heber Marsden, understand what constitutes real trial to women. Now I’ll be bound you, and all such women as you, would sing out of very gladness of heart in cutting up that cold shoulder daily, if only you believed it would be enjoyed and appreciated, when served, by the dear, fastidious creature whose comfort and happiness you only live to promote. Is it not so, Constance, darling?”

“I suspect it is,” I replied, with a smile upon a suppressed sigh; “but we must remember that the man was made first, *then* the woman, therefore it is in the natural order of things that wives should think less of themselves than of their husbands, and delight in ministering even to the material enjoyments of their lawful masters.”

She remained silent for a few minutes, deeply pondering. At length she took my face in her two hands, kissed it fondly—Mrs. Graham was essentially a kissing woman where she gave her heart—and said earnestly—


“I am of opinion that Heber Marsden is the luckiest man in England, and what is more, I am of opinion that his luck is above his deserts. He may deserve a good deal, my Constance, and you know I have a warm regard for him; *but*—he—does—not—deserve—*you*.”

She made a distinct pause between each of these last words to add to their effect, and I was vexed with her, and said she was unjust, and that henceforth we would not talk of my absent lover at all. What woman *can* care to be exalted at the expense of the man she has set upon a

pedestal, and is worshipping as if he were a god?

When next we *did* talk of him, a few black threads had got twisted into the web of my destiny, and my own words, in consequence, may have been somewhat bitter and strange.

We were sitting at tea one evening, after a pleasant though fatiguing day at Aberystwith, where Mrs. Graham and myself had been making sundry purchases of local curiosities for friends at home, and Colonel Graham had been buying a supply of new literature that rejoiced our very hearts to contemplate, Towyn not being famous for its libraries, and our mental thirst having been very imperfectly satisfied of late. The Colonel had promised to begin reading aloud to us as soon as tea was over, and both his wife and myself



were just in that languid state of mind and body when such an anticipation is most agreeable. We were, we said, far too tired to talk or to read to ourselves, but with a bit of make-believe work in our hands, and resting comfortably on our respective lounges, we could listen delightfully, and enjoy whatever the Colonel selected for our entertainment. I have a distinct remembrance of these little trivial details, because they were associated with what immediately succeeded them—the ending, or, at least, the warning of the end of my brief day of illusion and romance, and of my awakening from all sweet and beguiling dreams for ever.

“Ought you not to be hearing from your Lidmere friends, Miss Newton?” abruptly asked Colonel Graham, after his wife and myself had been saying we supposed we should be going home now in a

week or two. "You do not even know, do you, whether the heiress is at Abbey-gates yet?—and she seems, in general, a very zealous correspondent."

"I am expecting letters by every post," I replied, not adding what was the truth, that my imagination was sick and weary with the efforts it made day by day, and nearly hour by hour, to picture what was going on in "the dear old garden," as Heber had recently called it, and in the pretty shaded room where Mildred's piano stood, and in each and all of the localities to which her presence must now be giving a brightness they had long missed.

I wanted *desperately* to hear from Mildred. She must have so much to tell me. She had lived now (supposing her to have returned at the time she mentioned as probable) for several weeks under the same roof with Heber Marsden, for I did not

believe in his going away, and she had necessarily formed some decided opinion of him which, in the natural order of things, would have been communicated without delay to me as her bosom friend and *confidante*. Poor Mildred delighted in the possession of a Fides Achates, and could scarcely have done without one. Why, then, did she not write?

Vain question hitherto, but finding its solution, before we left the tea-table that evening, in the arrival of the postman with the long-looked-for missive, which our youngest landlady brought in and laid beside me, smiling in a kindly, patronising way, as if she guessed from whom it came. and was magnanimous enough, being a maiden lady herself, to congratulate me on its coming.

But it was not from Heber, as I saw at a first glance. It was in Mildred's pale,

attenuated, foreign hand, and, judging by the thickness of the packet, that dear friend of mine had found plenty to say to me at last.

But what had she said ?

My heart was beating so rapidly, and my cheeks flushing so hotly, that I dared not open my letter in the presence of the sharp-sighted Colonel and his watchful wife. To the latter I said in a low, agitated voice, which I tried to make a cheerful one,

“You will excuse me if I go to my own room to get through the volume herein contained. I will be back in ten minutes for the reading.”

A rash promise, under the circumstances, and one destined to remain unfulfilled. A sick foreboding at my heart warned me that it would be unfulfilled, as I went slowly up the short flight of stairs leading to my own sanctum, shut close the door,

and sat down by the side of my bed to read the two letters I found in Mildred's envelope.

CHAPTER VII.

TWO FATAL LETTERS.

THE first, from Mildred herself, I must give without abridgment, as, notwithstanding its flightiness, there was no part of it less interesting and significant to me—poor me!—than another. Thus ran the letter:—

“MY DARLING, PATIENT CONSTANCE,

“For patient you *must* be, or you would have written to scold me long ere now for my inexcusable silence. To think of my having been between two and three weeks at Abbeygates without re-

porting myself in any way to the dear friend I am for ever missing, and who sympathises, I well know, in the very least of my pains and pleasures. I must tell you, first, that I was really glad to get home at last, having grown a little tired of foreign life and gaiety, and of Mrs. Radcliff's weariness and bitterness—the weariness and bitterness of a woman who has all that the world can give, and frets her heart out because it cannot give more. She and Mr. Radcliff are at the Grange now, but Gilbert is in London, and proposes journeying to the Antipodes, I believe, at the earliest possible date. His mother is very angry at his continued insensibility to my many charms, and there is a decided coolness between them. This, however, will not perhaps surprise you much, and I am going to surprise you before I have done. To begin with, can you credit the

strange fact that I am learning to love Abbeygates as cordially as I once hated it, and can you at all, you wise, clear-seeing darling, form a guess at the explanation of this marvellous change? I came home with the conviction that if I found Heber Marsden still here I should detest him, and quarrel with him the whole day long, and I have an idea that he was *quite as fully prepared to dislike or despise me*. I came home, too, with my heart not a little sore and embittered from the discoveries I had made of my own small value, except for my money, in the matrimonial market, and resolved to give it all up, and endow a hospital or a sisterhood with my superfluous wealth, as soon as I obtained possession of it. Well, my darling, I saw Heber Marsden, and I adored him from the moment I looked into his perfect face, and heard his flute-like voice, giving me a

cold, calm welcome. Constance, if this man trampled on me, beat me, kicked me, as some men kick their wives, six days out of the seven, I should adore him still, and be content to serve him as a slave for ever and ever. As yet he is simply kind and friendly to me, and this more because he likes my playing and singing than from any prepossession towards myself.

“We are practising loads of duets on my piano, and I generally go to the church when he plays the organ there. Oh, Constance, what divine playing it is! I wonder the old knights and dames, lying in the vaults underneath, do not rise up and dance to his music, as the rocks and stones are said to have done to that of Orpheus. If I could cherish the hope that he would ever, in the ages to come, care for me the least bit in the world, I believe I should die of joy. I was never in love in all my

life till now, and I suppose that is the reason why I have taken the disease so violently. I need scarcely say that I have not admitted the antiquated ladies here into my confidence; but I fancy that Penelope—bless her soft old heart!—watches me narrowly at times, and sighs in a very sentimental fashion when Heber and myself even take a brotherly and sisterly stroll in this enchanting garden (which he so dotes on) together. I must not forget to tell you how shamefully my miserable curmudgeon of a guardian has behaved to poor Dr. Marsden, who, you are aware, has lost *everything*, and is nearly penniless. I entreated him (old Flintoff, I mean), to let me lend a couple of thousand pounds to my aunts' cousin, they offering to be securities, and he proposing six per cent till he could repay it. *Could* any request, I ask you, my sensible and

practical one, be more reasonable? and yet this precious guardian of mine writes in reply a cross, snarling letter, refusing to let me lend a single penny, and rudely asserting that the Miss Lambs must have been dreaming to suppose he would be such a weak fool. Dr. Marsden has taken the disappointment beautifully, but of course he feels it, as we *all* do, and I expect the dear old sisters will now be obliged to sell out for him. Such a complication, is it not? and he deserving the most prosperous destiny in the universe. And oh, my Constance, can I help thinking sometimes that if only—*if only*—for I repeat those two words to myself a hundred times an hour—if only he liked me well enough to marry me, every difficulty would be solved. I should glory in endowing him with my entire fortune, without asking to have a brass farthing settled

on myself. Don't think me quite a lunatic, darling, if you can help it—I am merely in a state of mental and moral inebriation, which *may* kill me in the end, but of which I should esteem it passing sweet to die.

“Now I have told you all there is to tell *at present*. My next letter *may*—but I am sure it won't—convey to you the tidings that my tiny seedling of a hope is growing into a beauteous flower.

“Think of me, my best and truest of friends, and hope *for* me, not that I deserve this thing, but that it is—my life.

“Your loving, heart-burdened friend,

“MILDRED.”

Possibly the sympathising reader may think with me that there was enough in this letter of Mildred's to sober and crush a braver heart than mine, and that I might have been spared another turn of the rack

till I had gained breathing time from the first taste of its lacerating wheels ; but there was still Miss Penelope's not less rousing communication to be administered, and, breaking the double seal (for of course it was strictly private),[!] I opened and read it through, finding it, however, very difficult, in my utterly stunned condition, to gather its full import at once.

This was the dear, simple little spinster's confidential letter :—

“ MY DEARER-THAN-EVER YOUNG FRIEND,

“ I am so bewildered and dazed, from the many bewildering things going on around me, that my poor brain, never a strong one, has quite ceased to help me in distinguishing between right and wrong as regards my personal meddling with the things I have alluded to. Dear Lucinda still says we have no ex-

cuse for interfering, and that young folks must learn to manage their own affairs, and to extricate themselves from any difficulties they get into. Well, this is true, no doubt, only I cannot forget that I was once young myself, and my sympathies lean towards those (I suppose it is very silly) who act upon the principle of 'all for love, and the world well lost.'

"Now, my dear young friend, this being the case, I feel that I *must* write to you concerning what is on my mind, though I greatly fear I shall, by so doing, risk bewildering and grieving you, as I myself am grieved and bewildered. You know that our niece, Mildred, has returned to us, and returned, I am bound to say, so wonderfully improved that we were positively startled on first seeing her. She has lost all her superfluous *stoutness*, and has grown into a really elegant young

woman, with softened manners, and a playful vivacity, in lieu of her old boisterousness, which is very winning. But this is scarcely to the point. How shall I break to you, my dear, inestimable young friend, that our impulsive, affectionate child has fallen desperately in love with Heber? Alas! it is the piteous fact—piteous because love with Mildred is a stormy passion, and because, as you and I know, *his* heart is already otherwise disposed of. In her innocence she believes that she has yet kept her secret from all eyes; but *I* discovered it first, then Lucinda, and, finally, Heber himself, to whom, I can assure you, it is, *as yet*, a source of distress rather than of gratification.

“If dear Lucinda had not been opposed to our meddling, I should have given Mil-

dred a hint in the beginning. I could not have done so *before* she lost her heart, inasmuch as I feel sure that *that* took place at their first meeting. I did suggest to Heber, a day or two ago, that he might quite naturally confide to her his attachment to you ; but he said, rather gloomily (poor fellow ! he is always gloomy now), 'Why should I ? In the utter uncertainty of my ever winning Dr. Newton's consent to my marrying his daughter, Constance would object, and very properly, to my prating of my love for her to a girl like Mildred, who, if she has a passing fancy for me to-day, will get over it, and bestow her warm southern affections on a worthier and more appreciative man, to-morrow, or next year at latest.' Now, my dear young friend, this was scarcely a kind speech as regards poor Mildred, but then,

we must remember that Heber is worried nearly out of his life, Mr. Flintoff having positively refused to lend the money we wanted, and there being only Lucinda and myself left to do it. Dear, sensitive Heber feels this *dreadfully*, and declares he would rather break stones on the road (which, as he is not strong, and has most *delicate* hands for a man, *must* be a figure of speech) than subject us to the inconvenience, now he knows it is one. You begin, I am sure, my dearer than ever young friend, to see how wretchedly complicated everything has become, and to understand how natural it is that my foolish old brain should work at the matter, and think how all the difficulties *might* have been solved, had certain conditions not existed, which of course I am glad *do* exist, because of my sincere esteem for you, my dear young friend, and my conviction that

Heber will never meet with any woman who comes so near to his ideal, and to whom he could so ardently attach himself. At the same time, if you had *not* met, he would not have known what he had missed, and he might have grown to like Mildred (especially she being such a first-rate musician, and they singing and playing duets together in a manner to shame the very larks and nightingales), well enough to marry her and her delightful fortune. But it is idle, in one sense, to talk of this now, since, independently of his unbounded love for you, Heber is a man of the strictest and nicest *honour*, and would die at the stake, though not exactly fashioned of the stuff out of which ordinary martyrs are made, rather than court one woman while he was as good as engaged, if not actually so, to another.

“Still, my dear young friend, I am for

ever haunted by that line of Byron's, paraphrased slightly—

‘Oh, had *they* never, never met,
Or could *those hearts* e'en now forget!’

and I fret and fume, and confuse myself over the most absurd wishes and regrets, which grow wilder and more confused every time I see Mildred silently worshipping the very ground trodden by Heber's feet, and Heber looking as if he would be thankful for the clouds above his head to descend and crush him into nothingness. Well, I suppose matters, however wrong, will right themselves, or be righted by One wiser than we are, by-and-by. Lucinda says they will, and I am bound to believe her—only, you see, my dear young friend, I have been impelled to write to you of what is pressing so sorely on my mind, because, having once been

young myself, I feel deeply for all young and loving people.

“There is that fine-natured Gilbert Radcliff wanting a wife, and, according to Mildred, wanting that wife to be Constance Newton ; but why do I say this ? Not to grieve you whom I so highly admire and esteem, but simply to cast out a little of the superfluous ballast with which my poor brain has been recently charged. Ah, me ! I wish I could be as trusting as dear Lucinda, and take things quietly and philosophically.

“Now, farewell, my sweet young friend, and let *nothing* I have written discompose your admirable serenity—the serenity in which poor Heber finds so great a charm—for a single instant.

“Yours, in perplexity and haziness, most lovingly and pityingly,

“ PENELOPE LAMB.”

But what could her perplexity and haziness be in comparison with mine? I have the dimmest possible recollection of what followed immediately on my reading of this second letter. I know only that darkness was stealing into my room—the darkness of a Summer night—when Mrs. Graham, alarmed at my prolonged absence, came, at length, to seek her guest, and found me sitting still by my bed, with the two letters open before me, and I looking, as she told me afterwards, as though a Medusa's head, or something equally petrifying, had turned me into stone.

CHAPTER VIII.

THREE DAYS.

“ I KNEW there must be something wrong,” said Mrs. Graham, standing beside me with her shaded candle, and looking anxiously into my rigid face. “ May you tell me what it is, dear, and can I help you in any way ? ”

Her kind words roused me from the utterly stunned, stupid condition into which I had fallen, and I said, in a voice that I should never have recognised as my own—


“ You shall read one of the letters I have had, and I will tell you a part of the con-

tents of the other; and then you shall say what *you* would do were you in *my* place. I have been trying all this time to think what I *ought* to do; but the more I think, the more hopelessly bewildered I get. I suppose over-fatigue (and you know we *were* so tired from our long day at Aberystwith) has a tendency to make people stupid."

Mrs. Graham did not reply, being already deep in Miss Penelope's rambling epistle, and probably estimating my talk at its real worth. I watched her face as she read, and saw that it expressed more indignation than astonishment, the indignation, now and then, giving place to amusement which I could scarcely wonder at, considering the good little spinster's peculiar style of composition. At last the letter was got through and laid down, while my companion said—

“And now for what you have to tell me of the other—from Dr. Marsden himself, I presume?”

“No,” I answered, with a shiver, “Dr. Marsden has not written. The other is from Mildred, and confirms what her aunt told me; only her way of putting it is in agreement with her impulsive, uncalculating temperament. Poor child! she has not the remotest notion, *everybody* having seemed to unite in keeping it studiously from her, that Dr. Marsden is anything to me, and she has consequently laid bare her whole heart in this letter, making sure of my sympathy. Now, you see, I must either act the hypocrite and liar, and yield her the sympathy she seeks, warmly, and as a true friend should, or I must say plainly, ‘Heber Marsden has given his heart to me, and I love him, and we hope to spend our future days together.’ Dear Mrs. Graham,”



I added, clasping her hands tightly, and letting the bitterness drop out of my voice, "tell me, candidly and seriously, what you would do. I want to do what is right, and not to be selfish in this torturing dilemma."

Without a moment's hesitation, Mrs. Graham answered—

"I should offer Dr. Marsden his freedom, without an hour's delay, and then see what comes of it."

My poor heart went down, down, down (as if weighted with a whole ton of lead), into an apparently bottomless abyss, as I listened to these few calm words, though they were no more than I had expected.

I could not speak for a second or two, and my pitying companion, kissing me tenderly on the cheek, said again—

"My poor darling, this advice is unwelcome; but you compelled me to say

what I thought. You see, if he had written——”

“Yes, yes,” I interrupted hotly (for my womanhood could not fail to assert itself in such a crisis), “I know and feel that his silence is against me, and I mean—I meant before—to do what you advise. There is indeed nothing else to be done. But you would have remarked that Miss Penelope strongly insists on his continued attachment to me, and he *may* write yet. Don’t think me weaker than you can help,” I pleaded earnestly, for I saw by her face that she could not enter into my vacillation; “do you suppose I would wait one instant if I believed he *wished* his release—I would die ten thousand deaths first—but Mildred herself affirms positively that he is only just kind and friendly with her, and that she has not the shadow of a hope of ever winning his love. Now if this is the true

state of the case, and he still cleaves in heart to me, should I be justified, having nothing against him, *as yet*, in dissolving our at least implied engagement, and leaving him to imagine that I was inconstant?"

I waited, as a prisoner waits for his verdict of life or death, for her reply.

She pondered a little this time, and spoke cautiously at last.

"My dear child, it may, of course, be that our poor, harassed friend is as innocent of any complicity in the views of his hazy relative, and those of the susceptible heiress, as you and I are, and that he is only waiting to write to you to see how his affairs turn out. Don't do anything hastily. Give him a week longer—a fortnight, if you prefer it, and then, if you hear nothing, assert your dignity. We can stay here, or go elsewhere, to suit

your convenience. You know we are neither of us—Johnny or myself—in the slightest hurry to get home.”


“You are both too good to me,” I said quickly; “but I don’t want a fortnight, I don’t want a week—I will take three days only—Heaven help me through them!—and then, if no letter comes from him, I will set him at liberty, and give poor Mildred a chance of obtaining her heart’s desire. I promised her ages ago that I would never stand in the way of her happiness, and unless *his* happiness is involved in my resignation, I never will.”

“But don’t fall into the error of being ultra romantic and quixotic,” said Mrs. Graham, warningly. “No woman is called to give up her lover for another woman’s sake. My advice has only reference to the possibility of Dr. Marsden being driven, by his difficulties, to choose (were he free)

a marriage of interest in preference to one of affection. He is certainly not a man voluntarily to encounter, either for one he loved or for himself, a life of struggle and even comparative privation ; and so far he is in the right, for he would be miserable under such circumstances, and make his wife more miserable still—— Now, come down, my dear child, and get your thoughts diverted a little. You will be no nearer to the working out of your problem if you stay here alone till midnight.”

The three days that followed would be memorable to me could I live to be a hundred, and could every hour of my life be one of unbroken sunshine. The post came in twice, morning and evening, at Towyn, and as the hour for each delivery approached (the first was about nine), my tortures of suspense were cruel beyond all words.

Luckily my friends were not very early risers, so I could remain in my own room till after the postman had been in the morning. For quite an hour I usually sat, half dressed, by my window, which commanded a view far down the village street, and from whence I could see the red-coated official, with his brown leather bag, full ten minutes before he reached Plas-Meeni. Ah! what emotions, what heart-heavings, what mental torments of every kind (with such a faint little sprinkling of hope over all), were compressed into those dreadful minutes! He was a very slow-footed, leisurely sort of man, and not averse to a gossip with the servant girls who came, at his summons, to receive their employers' letters. How I detested the smirking, coquettish, idle young women who encouraged him in his dawdling ways! How maliciously inclined I felt to report



them to their mistresses, and the provoking letter-carrier to anybody with authority to reprimand him. And then the sudden deadly sickness that came over me, as he reached our own door, and either knocked, with that peculiar hard crispness which startles even when we are expecting it, or passed on lightly and carelessly to the next house. Oh! how vividly it all rises up before me again now! And how infinitely thankful I am in the reflection that *that* special experience cannot, by any possibility, be lived over anew, as long as I am a traveller in this world of discipline and tears.

And *nothing came of it!* The three days ran their appointed course; the June sun arose and set; the June winds blew softly and sweetly over the happy earth; the June flowers bloomed and withered, and Heber Marsden did not write.

At the close of the third day, I took counsel of no one, but out of the suffocating fulness of a heart that had grown unnaturally hard and bitter, wrote thus briefly to Dr. Marsden—

“ You are as free as air. With my own hands, and deliberately, I break the very frail bonds that for awhile united us. Neither you nor I can control destiny, and everything has been, and *is*, against us. I shall infer, by your persevering in the silence you have, no doubt conscientiously, maintained of late, that you acquiesce in my inevitable decision.

“ Yours truly,

“ CONSTANCE NEWTON.”

Not till my letter was gone did I tell Mrs. Graham what I had done, and she, dear woman, putting her tender, shelter-

ing arms round me, and coaxing my poor, weary head down to her shoulder, said, with an animation which had become rare to her of recent days—

“My darling, you have done wisely and well. Even Colonel Graham, who is such a devoted admirer of Dr. Marsden’s, is of opinion that you could scarcely, with dignity and self-respect, have done otherwise. He may still refuse the freedom you have offered, but should he not do so, we will take you anywhere you like, and you shall not go near Lidmere till all this excitement has blown over, and you have learned, in some degree, to forget the past.”

“To forget the past!”

I repeated her kindly-meant words to myself, with a dull, hopeless pain, a hundred times during the long night that followed the sending forth of my letter, and always, in so doing, I asked myself—“what

will life be like to me while I *remember* the past, and what wondrous lore, or what skilled magician, can teach me to forget it?"

CHAPTER IX.

AN END TO SUSPENSE.

I DID not watch for the postman any more, although Mrs. Graham had suggested that Dr. Marsden might write and decline the freedom I had offered him. For my part, I had no such expectation. The hope, inherent in my nature, had lived a long life, and had died a slow death at last ; but it *was* dead, and buried out of my sight ; and, remembering all I had suffered while it stayed with me, I had no wish for it to revive again, just to mock me with its deceptive sweetness.

We left Towyn shortly after I had sent

my letter to Dr. Marsden, spent a week at Barnmouth, another at Dolgelly, and finally took up our quarters at Aberystwith, where dear Mrs. Graham thought the life and comparative gaiety would sometimes interest me a little, and, at any rate, keep my mind from dwelling perpetually on the one "fatal remembrance." She and her kind husband watched me anxiously and tenderly, said I grew thinner and whiter every day, and often declared they must send for my father to prescribe for me, if *their* remedies of frequent change, and friendly ministrings, and sympathy as warm as human hearts could give, proved of no avail to me.

I told them I wanted no doctoring, that they did for me even more than I required, and that when I was sufficiently chilled by the mist and shadows amongst which I was foolish enough to be walking, I should

make a sudden leap into the warm sunshine again, and astonish them all.

"I wish you would, my poor darling," said Mrs. Graham tearfully (the very sight of my face seemed to have a weakening effect upon those fine, expressive eyes of hers), "and I wish, too, you would give some vent to your inward pain by more open railing against the authors of it. You are too patient and too reticent for your own good. I am sure, were it *my* case, I should take a delight in calling a certain gentleman all the ugly names I could invent. Say what you will, Constance, there *is* a relief in abusing those who have grievously wronged us. Only try it, and you will see that I am right."

I twisted my lips into the smile she had intended to provoke, and said—

"But you know, dear, I do not consider myself wronged. Dr. Marsden could

not control circumstances, and fate has been against us—that is all. As for calling him names, I know of none that would be applicable; and though the past has faded, like a withered leaf, for me, I am weak enough to desire that it should be preserved in my memory as something that ~~was~~ fresh and pure and sweet while it lasted. If I can help it, there shall be no wall of bitterness or resentment ever built up around this strange, brief episode of my life. And I will strow its grave with flowers, when I have grown wise and strong enough to cease watering it with tears.”

“What a romantic little goose it is!” commented Mrs. Graham, as I opened the windows of my foolish heart just that much for her—“and I used to think you the most practical, matter-of-fact young woman in the world. This man with the

Longfellow face must be a great enchanter. We cannot wonder that he should grow somewhat vain under his all-conquering powers."

"No, I don't wonder," I said listlessly ; "but I wish I knew what was going on in Lidmere. Why does nobody write and tell me the worst, or rather I should call it the best now, for if a cup of wine is standing ready for the drinking, it were the height of folly and wastefulness for *all* to dash it to the ground."

The first news that I did get from Lidmere came, oddly enough, in one of the very rare letters my dear father found time to write to me. After certain domestic details, in which he thought I might be interested, occurred this intelligence :—

"Our small town has a choice piece of gossip to feed upon at the present moment.

It is reported that Dr. Marsden is courting Miss Earnshaw, and that she is exhibiting a singular readiness to be won. For my part, I do not believe a word of it, as my impression has always been that he was a sweetheart of yours, Conny; and that you had given your heart to him. I know the young fellow has his defects, but he is certainly a gentleman and an honourable one, and, until I hear from you that there was no ground for my conviction, I shall turn a deaf ear to all these idle tales. I am reluctant to add that these same stupid gossips have got hold of your name too, my dear, and are asserting that Marsden has jilted you for the heiress. This I should like to be in a position to contradict with authority. Our good friend, Miss Brown, has, I find, contradicted it flatly, *without* authority, and in her own uncompromising way, wherever she has heard a

syllable of it. Write me at once, Conny, and tell me the exact truth."

No easy task. But that dear man, who loved me so fondly, must never know the real state of the case, if by any skilful devisings it could be kept from him. So I wrote, while my whole spirit and flesh were smarting and writhing under this Lidmere gossip, which *I* believed in implicitly, and said—

"Dr. Marsden is free, as far as I am concerned, you precious, imaginative old man, to woo all the spinsters in Lidmere, or in England either, for that matter. Mildred's money will be very acceptable to him, as he has just lost all his own, and I hope she herself, poor child! with her loving heart, will not be very much less so. Should the report prove true, depend on it I shall be amongst the first to wish her joy."

If this was hypocrisy, I think it will be forgiven me. I loved my tender-hearted, generous, unselfish father with a very deep affection, and my personal sorrow and mourning would have been largely increased if I had permitted him to have the slightest share in them.

Mrs. Graham thought I was quite justified in writing as I had done, and the Colonel insisted on hiring a carriage that same day, and taking me to the Devil's Bridge. I believe my friends hoped that the fierce roar of the crashing water would drown to my sensitive ears the tender wooing going on amongst the rose-trees in the sweet old garden at Abbeygates.

If it failed in doing so, it was not their fault—nor do I think it was entirely mine.

But that Summer had been a specially warm and debilitating one, and without becoming actually ill, I drooped after this, with

a sort of low fever that sapped my strength imperceptibly, and left me as feeble as a little child. Our expeditions had now to be given up, and I was obliged to lie nearly all the day on the bed in my own room, the windows wide open, that the breath, which for ever seemed failing me, might obtain some relief, and Mrs. Graham sitting with her work beside me, or reading aloud when I could listen with any degree of comfort or interest.

How painfully distinct to me, even now, is the recollection of those long, long Summer days, wherein are associated the perfumes of roses and honeysuckle (entering from the garden on which my windows looked), and the ceaseless hum of Summer insects, and the soft west wind lifting, from time to time, the hair from my hot forehead, and Mrs. Graham's subdued voice reading a story or a poem that I rarely un-

derstood much about, and the endless flights of my fevered imagination to the garden and the house at Abbeygates, and to Lidmere Church, and to every scene where I could picture *those two* together, and Mildred taking as her right, as well as her blessing, all that had once been mine.

My heart was very sick and very sad in those days. I did not accept my cross graciously, or bear it as though I knew that it was wisely and lovingly bestowed. I missed the golden fruit from life's royal banquet on which I had fed with such pure delight, and I had no relish for the bitter herbs that had been forced on me in its place.

Mrs. Graham was very judicious as well as very tender with me at this time. She never encouraged me to speculate about the future, *their* future, which was always in my thoughts, neither did she check me

if I showed an inclination (very rare this was) to talk of the vanished past. Once she said, and the words made a deep impression on me—

“Constance, it may comfort you a little to know that *your* wound has brought, in a strange way, some healing to mine. Seeing what women *may* suffer, I am fast growing reconciled to the thought that my tender darling has been safely garnered in her Father's house before such blighting sorrow as this could reach her. I can thank God that her pure heart was early given to her Saviour, and that He took her, in the midst of her innocence and happiness, to dwell with Himself for ever.”

I was glad to know that a spirit of resignation was coming to this dear woman through any means, but I think human grief is too selfish, while it reigns supreme, to derive much consolation from the fact

that it has, in its essence, a medicinal property capable of benefit either personal or relative.

There has only trodden our sin-stricken earth *One* sufferer who could really glory in the knowledge that *His* human anguish was bringing healing and blessing to myriads of the weeping children of men.

I waited long, but certainly far from patiently, before I got any additional news from Lidmere, and the first that reached me was in a letter from Miss Lamb, and proved not the less crushing that it was written in her usual pompous and Johnsonian style. Here are its contents:—

“MY DEAR MISS NEWTON,

“My sister, who has developed quite an *epistolary* taste lately, for which I am *most* thankful, as it will spare me considerably in the *future*, told me this

morning that she was *about* to write to you *again*; but it instantly *struck* me that, in the present most *important* and *interesting* crisis, it devolved on *me*, as the *head* of the *house*, and Mildred's eldest aunt, to do so. Briefly then, I have to *announce* to you the formal *engagement* of our dear *niece* to Dr. Marsden. In some respects this is naturally a joyful event at Abbeygates,—I mean with my sister and *myself*,—but not quite in *all*. We are not *blind* to the fact, my dear, that Heber was an ardent *admirer* of yours, and we had *some* reason to believe (if you will pardon my *trenching* on such *very delicate* ground) that you were inclined to *reciprocate* his sentiments.

“As we have heard *nothing* from either of you *explanatory* of a change of *feeling*, we can only *conclude* that *prudence* has been the *man* of your *counsels*, and we cannot but approve of the result, only dear Pene-

lope, having always been somewhat of a *romantic*, soft-hearted *creature*, sighs a little over the *ruin* of the pretty *airy* castle I have a *suspicion* she foolishly *helped* to build. But, in consequence of the knowledge on our part which I have referred to, I think it *right* to tell you that poor Heber has been *influenced* by two leading motives—*expediency* and *pity*—in offering his *hand* to our niece.

“You are aware that his circumstances have become *desperate*, and that he shrinks, with quite a nervous *horror*, from beginning hard work again in any profession—his *own* above all. Well, my dear, in the midst of his bewildering difficulties and embarrassments, our impulsive Mildred *betrays* to him that she *loves* him, and is ready to cast *herself* and her *tempting* gold at his feet. Believe me, I mourn *sincerely* over her *weakness*, for in my young days it was con-

sidered *indecorous* and *improper* for a young woman even to know she possessed a *heart* till a gentleman entreated, on his *knees*, to be allowed to give his own in exchange for it. We must, however, make *allowances* in consideration of her *foreign* training; and, apart from *this*, I see no *reason* why she and Heber should not, in the *long run*, be very happy *together*. He thoroughly appreciates her *musical talent*, and will, I hope, admire and like her *personally* when he has ceased—as cease he must as soon he is a *husband*—to contrast her with the one woman his whole *moral* and *intellectual* being could and *did* approve.

“They will be married *very soon*, as, in a case like *this*, a long *engagement* would be a fatal *mistake*. Luckily, there is no need to obtain the *consent* of Mildred’s *churlish male* guardian, her father having only de-

creed that she should have *ours*, in the event of her *marrying* before she came of age. We have paid Mr. Flintoff the *compliment* of announcing the *engagement* to him, and have asked him to *advance* his ward a couple of *hundred pounds* for her *trousseau* and travelling *expenses*. This is remarkably *moderate*, but we prefer not rendering evil for evil, by *irritating* a *man* who evidently hates parting with a far-thing over which he has any *control*, and my sister and myself have *decided* on making Heber a *present* of five hundred pounds on his wedding morning. As Mildred is *sure* to be writing to you as soon as her first *wild* exultation has *subsided*, I shall leave her to give further *details*.

“I earnestly hope, my dear, you will receive the *news* I have felt it *right* to send you in a Christian *spirit*, which bids

us rejoice with them that *do* rejoice, as well as *weep* with those that weep.

“ With love and best wishes from Penelope and myself,

“ Ever your affectionate friend,

“ LUCINDA LAMB.

“ P.S.—I have just seen your excellent papa, and told him our great news. He opened his eyes very wide indeed, looked utterly incredulous for a minute, and then said shortly—‘The gossips were right then for once. If there is true regard on both sides, I wish the young people joy; if not, I hope your niece will not be a martyr through life by reason of her present infatuation.’ From this somewhat *strange* speech, my dear, I cannot help inferring that your *excellent* papa had made the same *observations* that were *forced* on my sister and myself in reference to

Heber's admiration of *you*, and that Dr. Newton, not being initiated in *all* the circumstances of *the case*, cannot comprehend such an apparently *light* transfer of affection."

The same day, by a later post, arrived Mildred's own jubilant announcement of her happy prospects. I will only quote one passage from the rambling and half crazy letter:—

"I know, my darling Constance, that my Aunt Lucinda has been writing to you, but I must add for myself that I am in the seventh heaven. Heber—*my* Heber now, though I can scarcely realise such an amount of bliss—has behaved so frankly and nobly with me in asking me to be his wife. He said—bless his truthful heart!—that he would not even pretend to be in love with me, but that if I would trust him he would do his utmost to make me

happy. You see, my darling, with all my caution, I allowed him to discover what he was to me; and he wants a wife, and he wants money, and if I am content to take him on his own terms, nobody has a right to complain or find fault. By and by, when he comes to experience my devotedness, and my *patience* in waiting for his love, he will perhaps learn to love me; but, anyhow, with or without love, I shall glory in spending my life with him. We shall be married in September, and you *must* be home, darling, for the wedding. Afterwards we shall travel till I am of age (the world over, if *he* wishes it), and then, when I get my money, I shall buy an estate as near Lidmere as I can meet with one, and we shall settle down within the reach of our friends, and have the jolliest times possible. Heber is very sweet with me, though not lover-

like, but he is grateful that I exact *nothing*; and when we are at our music he now and then grows quite bright and animated. Constance, I marvel every hour how *you* could have escaped losing your tender heart to him; only I suppose you are keeping that treasure (unknown to yourself) for the young giant at the Grange. I mean to have the loveliest dresses that money can buy—but not *fine* ones, as Heber hates finery, and he won't let me use a bit of my delicious sandal-wood perfume.

“It is so sweet to know that he has the *right* to tyrannise over me, that I believe, if he asked me to clothe myself in rags or sackcloth, I should do it willingly. What a moonstruck idiot you will think me, my wise, strong-minded darling! But I don't care—I *can't* care—with my heart brimming over with joy and gladness. If you

had ever loved anyone as I love Heber, you would know all about it. As it is, the dear, delicious mystery can only be a sealed book to you."

Well, at least the suspense was ended. There could be nothing more to learn, however much there might be to suffer. And though these two letters had stabbed me through and through as I read them, I am not sure that my heart ached with a deeper aching, after I had laid them aside, than it had done before.

As I was too weak to rise up and go to the Devil's Bridge, or any other bridge, for consolation (I doubt if the Falls of Niagara themselves would have met my case), poor Mrs. Graham was at her wit's end how to treat me now. She brought me religious books; she sang sweet, soothing hymns to me in the twilight; she talked to me of the Home afar off, where, before long, all

our earthly griefs would be forgotten ; and then she could do no more ; and, thanking her warmly for it all, I said—

“Leave me to myself now. Everything wears itself out in time, and this over-weary heart of mine will soon have exhausted its power of aching.”

CHAPTER X.

BACK TO THE OLD LIFE AT LAST.

WE were back at Lidmere at last, but not before we had travelled over the whole of North Wales, had ascended Snowdon, had descended mines, had seen whatever was to be seen, and done whatever was to be done; and all in search of my lost peace, which the kind friends who had taken me in hand were determined that I should regain somehow. And in a measure I *had* regained it—at least I was getting over, to some extent, the unutterable dread that all along had haunted me of beginning anew my old home life,

with its daily routine of monotonous duties, so calculated to keep alive any painful memories, and so changed as it must necessarily be, in all respects, since I had strayed beyond the happy valley, and learned what was in the wondrous world outside it. I do not mean that I did not dread this going back to simple domestic drudgery still, but the peculiar horror with which the idea had at first been invested, was lessened, and sometimes I had even a strong yearning to be with my dear father again, that I might contribute a little to his happiness, though I had lost my own.

In the early part of September I received a local newspaper with a high-flown, bombastic account of the grand wedding at Abbeygates. The beauty and wealth of the bride were largely dwelt upon, as were the popularity and general merits (including the unrivalled musical talents) of the

happy bridegroom. Then there was the splendid breakfast given by the universally esteemed mistresses of Abbeygates, with a list of the guests, which included nearly half Lidmere, though neither my father nor Mr. nor Mrs. Radcliff was amongst them. Miss Mullett, whose name occurred last on the column, may have been sent as a representative of her unsocially inclined patroness, but I scarcely think Mildred would have appreciated such a doubtful compliment, and I was sorry, for her sake, that Mrs. Radcliff, after all her professions of friendship for the heiress, had not done her the small courtesy of being present at her wedding. It was however quite in the nature of this proud, embittered woman to make her disappointments and her resentments influence all the actions of her life.

What might *I* not have expected had I

become her son's wife against her will?

It was immediately after I had received this deeply interesting local journal that I told my friends I was quite ready, and even anxious, to return home, and as they had only stayed away on my account, and Mrs. Graham was nearly her own old self again, we ceased our wanderings at once, and directed our somewhat tired feet towards Lidmere.

My first meeting with my dear father was a trying one. He took me in his arms first, and embraced me with a warmth and heartiness that both gladdened and touched me, after our unnaturally long separation. Then he drew me to a window, took off my hat with his own hands, peered anxiously and professionally into my conscious face, and at length said, gravely,

“Conny, my child, what does it mean when a healthy young woman spends a

whole Summer holiday-making amongst the mountains, and close to more than one bracing sea, and comes back fifty degrees paler and thinner than when she went? I repeat, my dear, what is the meaning of it?"

I know I was as red as a scarlet poppy while the dear suspicious man was examining me, but I replied, with some hastily assumed smartness,

"If the fact *is* a fact, you very absurd old man, it only means that holiday-making does not suit my constitution, and that the sooner I get to my old home work again the better. I wonder how many baskets full of shirts and socks are standing ready for me to mend?"

He kissed me, and held me close to him for a few minutes, but he did not say another word, and the next day I began the old familiar life, if not quite in the

spirit of a martyr (for I tried to be brave and cheerful), yet assuredly not with any large amount of buoyancy, and with none of my former zest and interest in those simple domestic matters which *had* been, in times past, all-sufficient for my contentment.

In a day or two the old ladies from Abbeygates called to see me. I had rather dreaded our first interview, and I suspect they had shrunk from it in an even greater degree. Miss Lamb was painfully stiff and embarrassed in the beginning, and seemed over-anxious to convince me that she rejoiced in my return, and regretted that I had been unable to come home for her niece's wedding.

"Such a real disappointment it was to the dear girl," she said, shaking her auburn curls, and both looking and speaking as if she were apologizing for some offence which

must not be directly alluded to; "but of course she understood that you could not separate from your friends abruptly, and she left no end of affectionate messages for you."

"And a little pearl locket, with her own and her husband's hair in it, twined in a true lover's knot," added Miss Penelope, who was evidently on the verge of hysterics. "Here it is, my dear,"—fumbling in an enormous silk bag she carried on her fat little arm—"and I hope you will like it, and wear it occasionally. Come to the window—you keep your rooms so dark, don't you?—and then you will see the workmanship better. Dear Mildred thought you would prefer pearls to a cameo, several of which she bought at Rome."

All this time the funny little spinster was giving me private signs that she wanted to speak to me apart, and though

I had no expectation of being either cheered or edified by anything she could have to say, I got up—handing Miss Lamb the morning paper,—and went with her to a distant window.

It was the same window to which she had once before allured me, to tell me when Dr. Marsden practised on the church organ, and to hint that it might be agreeable to me to go and listen to him. No doubt the tender-hearted, romantic spinster remembered this now, for as soon as she thought, by the rustling of the *Times*, that her sister was fully engrossed, she began to sob, and to wipe her eyes, varying these somewhat weak exercises by attempts to speak, all of which proved utter failures.

At length, when I was about to entreat that she would compose herself, or allow me to ring for a glass of wine, she stammered out, between her sobs,

“Oh! my dear young friend, it just breaks my heart to see you so changed, and looking as if life had lost all interest for you. I blame myself, indeed I do, and often lie awake at night thinking of my stupid meddling, and of what came of it. But how could I guess that, where the love was so true and deep, things could go amiss, and a sweet young creature like you have her fondest hopes for ever blighted? It is true my own were blighted years and years ago, but then they had not had *much* foundation; truth obliges me to confess that they were slight, infinitely slighter than yours, my poor dear, and therefore leaving me less excuse for grieving unreasonably over their destruction——”

I took the opportunity of an interrupting sob at this juncture to say—

“But indeed, dear Miss Penelope, I am not grieving unreasonably for anything,

and as for my looks, you must remember I have been knocking about during the last five months, and that the Summer has been a very hot one. I shall soon get back my flesh and colour, now I have come home to rest, and be quiet. What a lovely locket!—and how kind of dear Mildred to think of me!”

Miss Penelope sighed ominously, and shook her head and her cheeks together.

“My dear, I commend your spirit in making the best of things, but I was young once myself, and I have the profoundest sympathy for you; not but what I obliged Heber to confess to me, at last, that *you* had given *him* up, but then I am nearly sure you were driven to it by *his* not writing, and by what *I* said to you, in my bewilderment and perplexity, when I discovered that Mildred loved him, and reflected what her money would do for him.

And, oh! my dear, though I know it is wrong," added the excited speaker, with the apple cheeks growing redder and redder, and the wet eyes moister and moister, "I must just tell you that, if ever there was a broken-hearted man taken to the altar, our poor, sensitive Heber was that individual. He may get over it, and make a good husband. Heaven grant it!—but it is a fearful risk for Mildred, who dotes on his little finger, and has not the faintest notion that he has coveted another woman, and that woman her dearest friend. I was weak enough to ask Heber once, when I saw how miserable he was, whether he would like me, when you came home, to say a word from him in justification or palliation of his seeming inconstancy—and he replied, quite sternly, for a man of his gentle nature,

“ ‘Tell her to forget me as fast as ever

she can. There is nothing else that, under the circumstances, I could *dare* to say to the purest and the sweetest woman that ever graced this wretched world.' Those were his very words, my dear, and I have repeated them that you may know, at least, what he thought of you to the last. There can be no great wrong to his wife in this—and oh! dear, there is Lucinda looking our way, and wondering what I am chattering about. Do get fat and rosy again, my poor dear, or I shall die of self-reproach. Our garden is very pretty now. When will you come and eat some apricots?"

This question was asked aloud, as we both moved back to the part of the room occupied by the elder sister, who, hearing the invitation, took it up, and begged me, if my father could spare me so soon, to fix an early evening for drinking tea with them.

I winced, and, I am afraid, grew a shade paler, as I remembered that it was exactly this time last year that my father and myself had come to Lidmere, and that he had introduced me to the dear old ladies and to "the dream-garden" at Abbeygates.

Truly I had dreamt a whole life's history since then, but my dream was over, while the beauteous garden stood in its sun and shade, in its unvarying sweetness, as beauteous and attractive as ever.

"I cannot leave my father just yet," I said, a trifle hoarsely, "but by-and-by I shall gladly come."

Then they told me—Miss Lamb being the narrator—that the bride and bridegroom were now in Vienna, and proposed remaining in Italy all the approaching Winter. Mildred wrote in the best of spirits, her aunt added, only she was a little put out at not receiving the money

she had asked of her guardian, who, strangely enough, had not even condescended to reply in any way to the announcement of her engagement.

“And,” added Dr. Marsden’s cousin, “the worst of it is, poor Heber is of an extravagant turn, and his wife hints that the five hundred pounds we, my sister and myself, gave him on his wedding morning is nearly exhausted. I can only suggest writing to our lawyer in London, and begging him to seek out this uncourteous guardian, as, owing to Mr. Flintoff having managed all our niece’s affairs hitherto, she has never had a lawyer of her own.”

I was not greatly interested in this information, but I bowed and opened my eyes as courteously as though I were; and then my visitors took an affectionate leave of me, and I drew a long breath (if it was a sobbing breath, it could only have been

that the incessant talking had worn me out), and burying my face in my hands, had a distinct vision of my first walk to Abbeygates, of the dream-garden where I had sat for a minute or two in the sweet evening sunshine, of the little gushing sisters, and all they had told me of their cousin Heber Marsden, and of the niece they were expecting, and finally of my own castle-building concerning these two, as I walked back to my happy home.

My romantic castle-building had not proved altogether an airy fabric, but it seemed to me and my tired heart as if we must have been associated in some irregular and exhausting way in its uprearing. Anyhow, the past year had been a strangely fateful one for me, and I thought now, in my utter weariness, that I would gladly dig its grave and bury it out of my sight for ever.

The opening door startled me from all my dreamy reminiscences and visions, and, looking up quickly, I saw, to my dismay, that Mrs. Radcliff, in her gorgeous silks and laces, was being ushered into the room.

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. RADCLIFF FETCHES ME TO DINE AT THE
GRANGE—WITH A MOTIVE.

AS I should quite as soon have expected to receive a friendly call from the Lord Mayor of London, or from the Pope of Rome, had either of these dignitaries been passing accidentally through Lidmere, I have no doubt I betrayed some astonishment as I rose to welcome the grand lady from the Grange, and to place a chair for her. I had, too, the agreeable consciousness that I was looking my very worst, with swollen eyes, probably red nose, and

hair that my vision-seeing had rumped considerably.

But Mrs. Radcliff, whatever her secret impressions of me might have been, was graciousness itself outwardly. She said she had come to take me back with her to dine at the Grange, and added, when I was about to protest strongly against such an impromptu movement, that she had met my father in the town, and extracted a promise from him to join me at their dinner-hour, and spend a quiet evening with her husband.

"For, indeed," she said, with just a shade of anxiety in her face, "Mr. Radcliff has not been at all himself since our return home, and I want him to have a regular professional talk with your good father. He will not make a business matter of his ailments, but over a cigar and a glass of Burgundy he *may* be induced to speak of

them. Anyhow, it is all settled, and you are to come. I have a special motive of my own for wanting an evening with you, my dear Miss Newton (by-the-by, you are looking more like a ghost than I ever saw anything of flesh and blood look before), and I will have unlimited patience, if you can give me a sensational book, while you go and get ready. Don't dress, as we are quite alone—the delicious Mullett excepted; and you are one of those rare women who *must* look the lady, if you were dressed like the beggar-maid of King Cophetua."

Of course I had no choice but to obey this very imperious and flattering guest, but I was in no mood to anticipate pleasure from an evening in her society, and but for the arrangement she had made with my father, I would have resisted, or have tried to resist, her utmost allurements.

She did not force me to talk much during our drive to the Grange, only asking me a question or two about Mildred, and remarking, with her own peculiar cynicism, that the ex-doctor of Lidmere had done a clever stroke of business in winning the heart of the great heiress, who, she added, was not a bad sort of girl, now that she had toned down a little, and might have made a decent marriage by-and-by, had not Dr. Marsden's handsome face tempted her into an act of romantic folly.

Then she said, *àpropos* of some fleeting thought, I presume—

“My son Gilbert has betaken himself to the wilds of Canada—a most senseless proceeding, as far as I can see, but I hope he will bring me back some furs, as the country must be noted for these, if it is noted for nothing else. I hate frozen regions myself, but young men *will* have

novelty at any cost. Pity our satellite, the moon, is not accessible to them."

I thought Mr. Radcliff looked miserably ill, but he utterly disclaimed feeling so, and received me with his usual quiet friendliness. Mrs. Radcliff consigned me to the tender mercies of Miss Mullett while she dressed for the family dinner, and I had to listen to that decayed gentlewoman's mild railings against the world in general, and her own share of it in particular, till I am afraid I yawned unrestrainedly, and forfeited the character I had once gained with her of being unusually tender-hearted and sympathetic. At last she glided off to the subject of Mildred's wedding, and then I woke up and listened attentively.

"There is an instance," she said, with more than a suspicion of vinegar in her ordinarily cheery tones (Mrs. Radcliff was much too bitter herself to have tolerated

a bitter companion), "of the frightful partiality of destiny. Those two have everything that human hearts can desire—youth, wealth, talents, friends, and, we may presume, a fair amount of mutual liking. Why should this be so, Miss Newton, while others are left to feed upon husks all their lives? I call it unnatural and unjust on the part of Providence, don't you, now?"

"I should not dare do that," I said, "but I have sometimes wondered at the vast discrepancy between one human lot and another. You would have taken great notice of the bride and bridegroom at the breakfast. Did they both look quite—quite bright and happy?"

"It would have been a disgrace to them if they had not," replied Miss Mullett sharply, and looking up at me in astonishment at my question. "But now I think

of it," she added, before I could frame an excuse for having asked such an odd thing — "now I think of it, I did overhear a remark from somebody to the effect that the bridegroom scarcely justified his share of the term 'happy pair' that was in so many mouths that morning. I am sure I saw nothing amiss in his looks, and I can answer for his having paid every possible attention to his bride, who was radiant, and dressed, you may be sure, to perfection. I believe her veil of rich Brussels lace was a present from the old ladies at Abbeygates, for Dr. Marsden, you know, has lost his entire fortune, and that is why ill-natured gossips are hinting that he has only married Miss Earnshaw for her money. *You* have no reason to think this, have you?"

My heart gave a great leap, sending all the blood in my body to my face, at this

very leading question, and I think I must have improvised a fainting fit to save my conscience, if the door had not opened at that moment, and admitted Mrs. Radcliff, whose magnificently attired person I was never so thankful to see, either before or since. Miss Mullett had to spring from her seat beside me, and to receive, into her not over-yearning arms, her lady's fat and wheezing spaniel, and the lady herself took the vacated place on my sofa, and was very chatty and friendly till my father and dinner were announced together.

After greeting, and being warmly greeted by his host and hostess, the dear man (whose toilet, I regret to say, showed unmistakeable signs of having missed my finishing touches) came up to me and gave me a kiss.

"That is right, Conny," he said, in a lowered voice. "I am glad to find you

here. I was almost afraid, after I had agreed to come, that you would shirk it. A little change is good for you, my love, and you must, in the future, have more of it."

Then he gave his arm to Mrs. Radcliff, who smilingly delivered me over to her husband, Miss Mullett and the plethoric poodle bringing up the rear in close companionship.

We were a fairly sociable party at the dinner-table, and should have been more so (as my dear father seemed in unusually good spirits) but that Mr. Radcliff was evidently suffering from some internal pain which every now and then took from his usually ruddy face every vestige of colour. His wife made signs to us all not to notice him in any way, but I saw that my father's professional eye had great difficulty in refraining from straying often in

his host's direction, and I feared that he had already conceived apprehensions of something serious being the matter.

Mrs. Radcliff, however anxious she might secretly be, did not allow it to interfere with her zealous attention to her guests. She remarked again that I looked ill, and urged upon me every delicate and dainty dish that was placed on the richly-spread board. To my father she talked of the day's news, of local matters, of his increasing and widely-extending practice—this last allusion eliciting from him something which immensely astonished me.

“Yes,” he said, accepting without any false modesty the commendation Mrs. Radcliff contrived gracefully to mingle with her other remarks, “the work is getting a little beyond me now, and I must be thinking seriously of taking a partner, who should be a younger man than myself.

My old dobbin, too, is growing past very hard labour, and I am looking out for a good strong horse to supply his place. I hope to meet with one in time to put into the new carriage I have ordered—something a little neat, in which I shall not be ashamed to take this dear child of mine, who could scarcely have appeared in public in my ramshackle of a gig, but who wants carriage exercise just now badly enough——”

“Well, papa,” I gasped out, stopping any further comments on myself, “I really think you might have told me something of all this before. A partner, and a new horse and carriage! You have taken my breath quite away.”

He laughed, and rubbed his hands together, and looked—dear, scheming old man!—immensely pleased.

“The truth is, Conny, I wanted to give

you a grand surprise, which, by-the-by, it seems I *have* done; but I meant to rattle up to our own door one fine morning in the new turn-out, and invite you to take a drive. My secret has escaped me a little too soon, and you may thank our kind friend Mrs. Radcliff that you have come to your knowledge thus early. As for the partner, there is no immediate hurry for his appearing on the scene; only it is a fact that I must, before long, be thinking of one."

Then I had to allow Mrs. Radcliff to speak.

"I am really delighted, my dear doctor, at your excellent news," she exclaimed warmly; "but I hope you will allow me the pleasure, until your own conveyance is ready, of giving Miss Newton a drive every fine day. Her pale face quite grieves me, and I shall be glad to help,

in a small way, in bringing back her roses."

My father must have guessed that this would be a trifle too much for me, for he said quickly—

"Oh, you are too good, but there will be no need to trouble you to such an extent. Conny fancies she has a world of work to get through at home just now, and I hope by the time she has done one half of it, my trap will be ready for her. We shall both be the gainers—she in fresh air, and I in pleasant companionship—in all my country journeys."

Mrs. Radcliff smiled sympathetically, and said it would be charming. Then she and I and Miss Mullett and the poodle retired to the drawing-room, and left the two gentlemen to their wine and walnuts.

As soon as we had partaken of some

delicious coffee, which relieved a nervous headache I had felt creeping on during the whole of dinner, Mrs. Radcliff asked me if I would mind coming with her to her room upstairs, telling Miss Mullett to make herself agreeable to Dr. Newton when he appeared, and to have fresh coffee or tea served to him.

“Now sit down where you can rest comfortably, my dear,” began my hostess, as we entered her elegantly furnished bedroom; “here is a *chaise longue* that will just do for you—oh, you *shall* let me settle you in it”—as I began a protest against being treated as an invalid—“for you must know I have a good deal to talk to you about, and no one can listen pleasantly who is not in perfect bodily comfort.”

I wondered, with some suddenly awakened curiosity, what was coming now, but I had very little anxiety about it.

Sitting down herself, before her Dresden gallery of a dressing-table, after she had arranged me to her satisfaction on the luxurious lounge, Mrs. Radcliff once more commenced, a shade nervously—


“I have never thanked you, my dear Miss Newton, for all the trouble you took in fetching that lace for me. Nor did I know, till a day or two ago”—here the nervousness was more evident, as the speaker opened a jewelled case and touched a foreign looking letter lying on the top of it—“that you had found my son Gilbert here, and that he had somewhat rashly availed himself of the opportunity to make you an offer of marriage. I will, however,” she added, “as I wish to be perfectly frank and open with you, read you what he has written to me on the subject, before making any comments of my own or teasing you with questions.”

Then the mother unfolded her son's letter, ran her eye hastily over the first page, and at length found, on the second, the interesting passage she was in quest of.

"You reproach me, my dear mother, for leaving England, and I confess that, now such a formidable distance divides us, I feel your estrangement from me more than I did when I was with you. I cannot bear the thought that you continue to nourish anger against me because I disappointed you as regards Miss Earnshaw. Upon my honour, I would have liked the young lady if I could, but I am going to make a clean breast of it now, and to convince you that from the beginning the thing was impossible.

"The truth is, mother dear, I fell desperately in love with Miss Newton at our first meeting, and I shall never care for any other woman. I asked her to

marry me the day she went to the Grange on some commission of yours—I had, in reality, gone down to Lidmere with that express object—but she refused me point-blank, and I have not got over it yet. When I have, I will come back to England—I do not say to try my luck again, for she is not a woman to change her mind. Neither do I engage to abstain from doing so should she be still unmarried; for I could not take another wife, loving her as I do; and I suppose it is the correct thing for fellows in my position to marry and settle down some time. Now, in the meanwhile, my good mother, I want you to do me the kindness (since I am assuming your displeasure over) of showing some little attention to Miss Newton. She leads *far* too lonely a life, and I know she warmly appreciates sympathy and friendliness.



“ You need not be afraid of her presuming on friendliness from *you* in any way, for even if she liked me—which she never will, worse luck! having nearly said as much that day—she would not have me unless you and my father were quite prepared to welcome her as a daughter. I will not bother you with more of this entirely personal affair of mine, except to add that it has been very serious with me from the beginning. I always knew, if I fell in love at all, I should do it out-and-out; and, in point of fact, though my sweet, modest Constance had, and has, no idea of it, my courtship commenced the very evening of my introduction to her, and I have gone in for it, in a guarded way, whenever I have seen her since.”

Here Mrs. Radcliff came to a full stop, and slowly and deliberately refolded the letter before she turned, with a face that

had lost its usual listless repose, to look inquiringly into mine. As I said nothing (for, indeed, what could I say?) she continued, in a grave, though partially embarrassed tone—

“ My son has acted rightly in opening his heart to me, and I feel grateful to him that he has done it. I knew he admired you, but I was not aware it was the serious matter which it appears it is, or has been, with him. Now, my dear Miss Newton, let me say emphatically that, as far as you are *personally* concerned, I should have no objection to endorse his choice. You have enough grace and sweetness—I am not flattering you—to adorn any station, but Gilbert cannot afford to please himself in marrying. He does not know it, but it is a fact that our estate is terribly involved, and he *must* try to get over his prepossession as regards yourself, and marry a

woman with money. People think that because we live in a fine house, and have plenty of servants, and so on, that we are rolling in riches, but it is a grand mistake. For our station, we are very poor. Mr. Radcliff has spent mints of money on his gardens, on his horses, on his books, and in former days I was extravagant myself. Anyhow, not to weary you with details, there is an absolute necessity that the succeeding generation should have an increase of means, and I can see no way of securing this but by Gilbert choosing a rich wife. Now I will assume that, in refusing him, you assigned the true cause—want of affection. All young women of poetic temperaments think love essential to wedded happiness, and I am not going to argue the point with you here. I only wish to discover from yourself whether, this being the case, I may depend on your

continuing in the same mind should my son return to England and persevere in his courtship?"

The secret was out then at last. I was to be coaxed, and flattered, and beguiled into promising this anxious and ambitious mother that I would never, under any circumstances, marry her son. The idea rather amused me than otherwise. I was not offended at it, and after a minute's pause, to choose my words, I said, with a passing smile,

"I really think you may, for I like and esteem Gilbert Radcliff too thoroughly to accept all that he can offer without giving him even the poor gift of my heart in return, and that I cannot give. Do you desire, however," I added more gravely, "to exact a promise?"

"My dear, no," she replied hastily, "that would be ungenerous, and I am sure un-

necessary in your case. We quite understand each other, do we not?"

"I hope so," I said demurely, for I had a mischievous enjoyment in keeping this imperious lady on tenter-hooks. "My part of the compact is that I will never become your son's wife without loving him, as we women with poetic temperaments comprehend loving, and, moreover, that even if the impossible changed to the possible, I would not enter his doors, or yours, till you bid me welcome as your daughter."

"Thank you, thank you, my dear child," said Gilbert's mother then, getting up and kissing me lightly on the forehead. "I only wish you had been the heiress instead of Mildred Earnshaw, but wishes are idle things, and my son must try to find a wife who will unite your attractions with her convenient wealth. Now come down, and

let us see what the gentlemen have been about. I must have a word in private with your father concerning my husband's state of health."

"What *is* the matter with Mr. Radcliff, papa?" I asked, as we drove home at night, after we had very briefly discussed his own brightening prospects—"nothing serious, I hope?"

"Nothing less serious than angina pectoris—anglicised, spasm of the heart," he said gravely. "It is a fatal disease, though the victim of it *may* live a long life, and die of something else at last. His wife had suspected the true state of the case before I told her what it was. I have not told him, but I doubt if my caution will avail the poor man materially. He has had several attacks lately, and may go off at any minute. The son ought not to be out of England."

“Did you say this to Mrs. Radcliff, papa?” I inquired.

“Yes, my dear, I thought it right so to do, and she is going to send for him at once.”

“Oh!” I said; and then, having nothing else to say, we relapsed into silence, which was not broken till we reached our own door.

CHAPTER XII.

STARTLING NEWS—CHIEFLY AFFECTING THE
BRIDE AND BRIDEGROOM.


FOREMOST amongst the friends and neighbours who had come to see me immediately after my return home, was Miss Brown, the vicar's unpopular daughter. At her first visit she had only asked me about Mrs. Graham (having no leisure to go out to Woodleigh unless she could be of any use there), and said a few kind words to myself—for this blunt, outspoken woman could be gentle exceedingly where sick souls or aching hearts were in question; but on her second visit she had sur-

prised me by the earnest request that I would assist her in her arduous parish work. What she knew or guessed concerning my recent trouble and present state of mind, I have no idea ; but I am sure her object was to give me a new interest in life, and I was grateful to her for her kindness, even while I shrank from the task she desired to impose upon me.

“Well, take your time to think of it, my dear,” she said indulgently ; “but I know you will like the work when once you begin it ; and, having a pleasant exterior and gracious manners, you will get on with the people better than I do, who am plain and rough in speech, and when I find dirt and disorder cannot help rating the housewives soundly. I tell them that soap and soda are cheap, and that the same arms that were made to fold round

little children, were also made to scrub floors and tables."

And while I was thinking over Miss Brown's suggestion, and trying to nerve myself to take a district (for indeed I did sorely want a fresh interest in life), she came often with her needlework to sit with me in the afternoons, and she brought me, from her father's store, rare cuttings and seeds for my garden, and she talked so pleasantly and cheerfully that I began quite to look forward to her visits. This poor Miss Brown, whom a few pitied and more disliked, had a mind above the common, and a heart so imbued with the spiritual thoughts on which she habitually dwelt that in speaking of the world beyond the grave she brought it so near, and made it so sweetly homelike and attractive, that, in listening to her, you quite longed to be out of the body, and realizing the



peaceful blessedness she so familiarly described.

In return for her goodness to me (which when my dear father heard of he rubbed his big hands and chuckled, and said he always knew that woman was a jewel), I was able to give her, by-and-by, a frequent drive, for my father, after he had got a horse and coachman to suit him, and the new carriage had come home, declared—mendacious man!—that, for certain distances, he still preferred the antiquated dobbin and the atrocious gig, and on these occasions would insist on my using the smarter vehicle, and taking Miss Brown or Mrs. Graham for a long airing, which to both of them was a real enjoyment and benefit. Mrs. Graham had gone back a little from her amended health and spirits on first returning to Woodleigh, and I was so thankful to be in a position to ensure

her even the trifling distraction of a long drive now and then, showing her parts of the lovely county of Shropshire she had never yet seen.

At length I made up my mind to attempt some modest parish work under Miss Brown's immediate surveillance, and I soon found that I could do it with tolerable ease, and with genuine pleasure. The people took to me from the first (perhaps because I was the doctor's daughter, for my father visited most of the poorer inhabitants of Lidmere, and was immensely liked by them), and perhaps a little, too, because suffering had made me humble and patient, and I was so sorry for any of my own sex whom I found in grief or distress of mind, through child or husband straying from the right path.

My dear good father was delighted to see me thus employed, and he often said, laugh-

ingly, that it was evident the slums of Lidmere agreed better with my constitution than all the breezy mountains of healthy Wales.

“For you are getting your pretty colour back, Conny,” he could add at length, pinching my cheek, and looking quite joyful in this conviction—“and no thanks to airings in Mrs. Radcliff’s distinguished company, which I know your very soul revolted from. All honour and gratitude to our excellent and wise Miss Brown, who has been the real magician to work this change.”

But the quiet peacefulness, fast growing into the old contentment, or rather into a contentment that had a surer foundation, if it was wreathed about with fewer flowers than the old, was destined to receive a check in the arrival at Lidmere of news that was well calculated to shake that

small gossiping town to its very centre.

I had to go early one morning to Abbey-gates for a subscription the kind sisters had promised me, towards the setting up of a girls' sewing-class at my own house—a rather ambitious scheme, but one which was occupying all my thoughts for the moment. Ruth opened the door for me, and the length and gravity of her usually bright face suggested nothing less than that both of her mistresses were dead, and that she had come from laying them out.

“What is the matter, Ruth?” I said quickly. “The ladies are not ill, I hope?”

“Oh, miss,” was the low-spoken reply, “they are not ill—leastways, they were all right when they came down to breakfast; but since the post has been in, I think they have been beside themselves, for they have never rung to have the things cleared away; and I’ve heard them pacing the

room, and Miss Penelope sobbing, as she mostly does, poor lady ! when she is put out—Miss Lamb not being a crying sort, but feeling things as much, I make no doubt. Please to walk in, Miss Newton. They'll see you, if they'll see anybody."

I did walk in on this encouragement, and was instantly seized hold of by both pale and deeply agitated spinsters at once.

"Oh !" exclaimed the elder, with wild eyes, and seeming to find it impossible as yet to proceed further.

"Oh !" echoed the younger, with streaming eyes, that perhaps quenched their wildness, and squeezing my poor arm so tight that I did not know how to bear the pain of it.

"Suppose we all sit down," I said, finding them quite incapable (as they usually were) of making any suggestions for themselves in the first flush of a misfor-

tune—"and then you can tell me better what has happened. Dear Miss Lamb"—after they had adopted my resolution mechanically—"what news have you had?"

A groan, ending in a monstrous sigh, seemed to relieve a little the overcharged heart, and the elder spinster was able to reply to my question.

"News!" she repeated, dreamily at first—"news you may well call it! Nothing less than that Mildred's guardian has turned out a swindler, has speculated with most of her money, and lost it, and gone off to Australia with the rest. Our poor darling is penniless, and her husband has reckoned on her wealth, and they are spending at the present moment with the recklessness of millionaires; and he hates work, and there is not a farthing more for him from *any* source; and, oh, dear! oh, dear! what a calamity to come upon us in

our advancing years, and yet desiring to be submissive! Penelope, my dear"—turning with mild rebuke to her hysterical sister—"crying won't mend the matter. We *must* rouse ourselves, and think what *can* be done."

By-and-by I elicited that their own lawyer had been all this time prosecuting his inquiries, and had only just learned for certain the crushing facts he had sent his clients. There was no shadow of doubt about it. Mr. Flintoff had abused his trust, and cruelly and shamefully appropriated the whole of his ward's fortune to his own uses. How much he had rashly wasted in speculation, and how much absconded with, Miss Lamb's informer could not say; but, as far as the ward was concerned, this did not matter, as it was pretty sure it was *all* lost to her.

Before I left Abbeygates that morning

(for the poor little spinsters clung weakly to me, as they had done on a former occasion in their sudden trouble) they had decided to send at once for the bride and bridegroom, but to reserve their terrible intelligence till they should arrive. For comfort could be better spoken than written, they lovingly said ; and at least they had a home to offer till Heber could make one for his wife and himself. Poor luckless Heber ! who seemed doomed to have all his hopes blighted, and who must now forego his dearly-appreciated leisure, and put his hand to the plough in earnest.

Well, I can truly say that I grieved in my heart for them both, but I thought Mildred would feel it least, though she had certainly the most right to complain.

Of course this great and serious matter became a nine days' wonder in Lidmere, and was discussed and argued and specu-

lated about with a warmth that never wearied, until the two most deeply interested in it arrived; and then there was a momentary lull to see how they would take it.

“Conny,” said my father, coming in one morning in quite a flutter of excitement to his scrambling luncheon, “the young people are here—they arrived this morning at Abbeygates. I met Miss Penelope in the town, and she stopped to give me full details. Marsden, it appears, is utterly overwhelmed, as might have been anticipated, but his wife has received the intelligence bravely, feeling it chiefly for him. There is something noble in that girl, you see, after all. Will you go up by-and-by, and give her what comfort you can. She will take it kindly, being so attached to you.”

My breath nearly stopped at this cool

proposal, and I could feel that I was growing suspiciously white.

I managed, however, to say, with a got-up laugh,

“You dear, absurd old man! As if I *could* intrude on them the first day! You must be dreaming. If Mildred were alone, it might be all very well, but the husband and wife are sure to be together. Leave them in peace to discuss their plans for a day or two, at any rate.”

“As you think best, my dear,” he answered, glancing up at me with a keen look, which was as rapidly withdrawn. “I only thought that, as you and this poor young wife had been such warm friends, your immediate sympathy would be acceptable. But now, Conny, I have something else to say to you, and I must say it briefly, entreating you, my child, to be strictly frank and true with me.”

"Say on, papa dear," I answered lightly, though I felt horribly nervous, without knowing why, "all sayings of yours must be pleasant."

"I am by no means so sure of that, Conny," he observed gravely; "but I want to ask you a serious question. It has struck me that, if nothing better turns up shortly for Marsden, I might take him as the partner I am in search of. I am quite aware that I might do better for myself in the way of a thoroughly working man, and as regards money, of which he can bring none into the concern—but the people know and like him, and he will certainly work with less reluctance here than in a strange place. But now, my dear child," he added, scarcely *seeming* to look into my face, but in reality, I suspect, taking in all its troubled changes, "you must tell me, before I move an inch in the matter,

whether you object, in *any* way, to my bright idea, or rather whether there exists any reason to make the plan an unwise one."

I did not dare ask time for consideration, though I should have been glad to have a little. I only gulped down something of a strangling propensity in my throat, and said as quietly as I could speak,

"Papa dear, I think you are an angel to have originated such a kind and generous notion, and as far as I and my opinion are concerned there can be no possible reason against it. How grateful he ought to be!"

"I can trust my Conny?" he said then, not quite interrogatively, but still with an evident wish that I should confirm my first assertion, and looking at me with a loving, wistful look, that went to my very heart.

"Indeed yes, you precious old man!" I exclaimed, springing at his neck and bestowing on him a shower of kisses which served the double purpose of hiding my face for a minute, and of proving to him how I loved him. "And when will you see Dr. Marsden and propose your plan?"

"Oh, I'll wait a day or two, Conny," he replied cheerfully (for I believe I had completely reassured him). "The old ladies may think yet of something else for him, or necessity may develop resources in himself. Say nothing to anybody at present, and I'll choose my time to speak."

That same evening I received a short, excited note from Mildred, just asking me to come and see her as soon as I could, and adding that wild horses should not compel her to see anyone else for ages.

There was no help for it, then—I could not appear cold or unsympathising to the

friend who clung to me so warmly, and on whom such a heavy trouble had fallen. Rating myself severely for the reluctance I felt to face, for the first time since our parting, the man who had been my lover, I decided on going to Abbeygates early the next morning.

If there was a lion in the path the sooner he was met and slain the better !

CHAPTER XIII.

MY OLD LOVE AND I MEET BY CHANCE IN THE
DREAM-GARDEN.

I SHALL not easily forget poor Mildred's first reception of me.

She was alone in the breakfast-room (and oh, my thankfulness for this!) when I went in, and I scarcely recognized, in the comparatively slight young lady dressed in a plain grey carmelite, with only a bow of scarlet ribbon at her throat, and seated before a table covered with old letters and business documents of all kinds, the plump, rosy, and always smartly-dressed friend I had said good-bye to

about nine months ago. Her hair had got considerably rumpled in the apparent intentness of her business operations—fancy Mildred at business!—and her whole aspect was peculiar and original in the extreme.

On seeing me, however, she made a leap from her chair, overturning it in her wild haste, and enclosed me in her arms with an energy that was less like a human embrace than suggestive of a young strong bear who has got an unfortunate biped in his merciless clutches.

“Oh, you dear, dear thing!” she cried, in a voice that was certainly not just then adapted for singing—“how enchanted I am to see you once more! Now don’t speak one word of condolence, you tender darling, or I shall be off in fits, and I haven’t cried about my monstrous trouble yet, and don’t feel it *very* much except for

him, my poor, poor Heber ! who had naturally reckoned on my money, and who does so love his little refinements and luxuries, which it was my joy and pride to think I could bestow on him. But sit down, my Constance, and take that stupid hat and veil off, for I cannot see your dear face, and I have been kissing damp net all this time ; and I have loads and loads to tell you. Of course you have come for the whole day?"

"No indeed, my dear child," I said, letting her, however, take my hat and veil, "but I can stay an hour or two, especially if you are likely to be alone."

"Oh, I am safe to be alone, for the old ladies won't disturb us, and Heber has gone to Woodleigh, where he is sure to dine. At least you can dine here? I know Aunt Lucinda expects it, and is making with her own fair hands some extra delicacies."

It was eventually overruled that I *should* dine at Abbeygates, and return home early in the afternoon. Both the sisters came in to extort this promise from me, and to tell me that Mildred had far exceeded their hopes in her reception of their bad news.

"She is a dear, brave girl," added Miss Lamb, shaking every curl on her small head, and speaking for the first time, in my experience of her, in an hysterical voice—"and if her example does not nerve her husband to exertion, I shall think less of him than I have hitherto done; but it will; it must; and, in the meanwhile, we are more than happy to have them make their home here."

When we were again alone, Mildred spoke quite as warmly of her aunts as they had spoken of her.

"Only think," she said, "of their insist-

ing on our taking the best spare room, with a lovely dressing room for Heber attached, and treating us like honoured guests instead of like the poverty-stricken relations we really are. They even want, bless their kind old hearts! to supply the place of my maid, and to dress me every morning; but I would perish sooner than let them demean themselves in this way—besides, I manage very well, and Heber helps me with my outrageously long, thick hair, which is my only difficulty—Oh! Constance, I do love my husband, and I am so miserable in thinking of his *dreadful* disappointment. Isn't it cruel?"

"More cruel for you, dear," I said, half laughing at her wifely simplicity—"or at least it should be. Depend on it, work will do your husband no harm."

"Ah! but he would so have revelled, poor darling! in a life of leisure, and

travel, and study of his own choosing. And now he must forego it all, and slave at pill-mixing, and glare at human tongues, and perform no end of abominations of that kind. I want him to let me teach music. I could make heaps of money as a music-mistress anywhere."

"Mildred, my poor child, what a wild idea!" I exclaimed indignantly. "And what does Dr. Marsden say to this?"

"Oh, he won't hear of it. He gets furious when I speak of it—but that is ridiculous, because I should not mind it one bit."

"He ought to get furious," I observed shortly—"but now, Mildred love, will you explain the problem of this curiously littered table, and your intensely business face when I came in. What can you be about?"

"Oh! I was coming to that," she said,

sweeping all the letters and papers together till she could attend to them again. "It is just that I have a vague idea, detestably vague, I may call it, of my poor father having once told me of a little investment he had made for me in the English funds when I was quite a baby, and he a comparatively poor man. If such a thing *does* exist, there is a chance that the demon, Flintoff, did not know of it, and that it may be safe still. These are old letters and documents of my father's that somebody must have packed in one of my school-boxes when I left Jamaica, and I am searching for a possible memorandum in reference to the trifling nest egg. If it has only grown sufficiently to buy my dear Heber a good partnership, or to do anything else for him, I shall be unspeakably thankful. He does not believe in it, but I do?"

Mildred and myself being considerably left together till dinner-time, she told me all her story of wedded happiness, assuring me that it was such bliss to her to be allowed to love her husband that she rarely stayed to inquire how much he was learning to love her. He was very kind and gentle always, she said, never thwarted or opposed her in anything—liked to hear of her past life, was pleased to have her read aloud to him in the soft Italian tongue which Mildred spoke fluently, delighted in her playing and in her enthusiastic admiration of his own musical talent.

“In short,” concluded the well-contented wife, “we get on admirably, and my only grief hitherto has been on account of Heber’s occasional fits of mysterious depression. When these come on, I am helpless, as he insists on being left alone, and until they take their departure I moan

and groan about the house like—like—well, like a duck out of water.”

“But since he has known of your misfortune, how has it been with him?” I inquired, wondering if I should have managed his attacks of mental darkness better.

“Oh! he was nearly a lunatic at first, and suggested all sorts of wild schemes for going after that miserable old swindler and compelling restitution; but he is calmer to-day, and talking of setting to work as soon as he can. You see,” added Mildred naïvely, “we have every comfort and even luxury here. The privations and self-denials are all to come.”

It needed no prophet, I thought, to decide on which of the two these would fall, by her own loving contrivance, most heavily.

“You must come and see me as often as

you can, now I am in affliction," said poor Mildred, as I was bidding her good-bye early in the afternoon. "You must look upon me as part of your district, and give me my share of your tender ministrings. You always did me no end of good, you know."

A sudden impulse seized me, as I was going out, to walk up the old garden as far as the rustic Summer-house, and once there I sat for a minute or two to recall the past, and to assure my vicariously oppressed heart that my lost destiny had been in reality a gain. I *felt* rather than saw a something in Dr. Marsden, as a husband, that would possibly have robbed him of the best part of the devotedness I had blindly yielded him as a lover.

But Mildred would never discover it, and with her ardent, passionate nature, would adore and look up to the man she had chosen to the last.

Having arrived at this satisfactory conclusion, I rose to go, and in moving towards the entrance of my bower nearly fell into the arms, or rather, against the arms, of Dr. Marsden himself, who, unknowing even of my being on the premises, had strolled up here on his return from Woodleigh.

Never before or since have I seen a man's face grow so blue-white in an instant, or express such cruel, humbling embarrassment and agitation.

"Constance!" he said, but it was more like a cry of pain or fear than the mere naming of a name;—and then the red rushed over his whole working features again, and he moved aside for me to pass, adding in a low, shaking voice—"I beg your pardon, Miss Newton. The excitement of the last twenty-four hours has made me nearly beside myself. Pray

forgive me, and shake hands for my poor wife's sake."

I don't know how *I* looked all this time—I only know that I wished the friendly earth would open and draw me down to its embraces, but as it did, for obvious reasons, nothing of the kind, I had to hold out my hot, ungloved hand and to say—"There is nothing to forgive, Dr. Marsden. I have been with your dear, brave wife all the morning. She is one in ten thousand."

"She is indeed," he answered, in a firmer tone, adding (as I lingered a minute that he might not think I was afraid of staying with him), "Poor child! she wants to give music lessons, or to play and sing in public, that I may have lighter work. Miss Newton, I think my indolence and love of ease are shamed out of me at last. I scold and rail at Mildred when she will

talk of her wild scheme, but in my heart I venerate her for it, and feel that I am utterly unworthy of so good and devoted a wife."

I could not exactly endorse this sentiment openly, but I said a few low words expressive of my earnest hope that the present heavy cloud would soon blow over; and then I went on my solitary way, leaving my ex-sweetheart either to his old dreams, or to his new resolutions, in the dreamy rose-wreathed Summer-house.

I only had one accidentally private interview, after this, with Dr. Marsden, for many a long day, and that was on the occasion of his leaving our house the morning he had wonderingly and, I believe, gratefully accepted my father's offer of taking him as a partner. Not, however, quite on the terms the latter had originally meant to suggest, for Mildred's little nest

egg had been discovered, and had increased, from its first modest amount, to the value of four thousand six hundred pounds. Dr. Marsden insisted, and I was glad he did, on giving my father fifteen hundred of this lucky wind-fall, and the remainder was eventually advantageously invested, and ensured the young couple a very small but certain income, while they were without a home of their own.

But I was about to tell how I met Dr. Marsden in the lobby of our house, on the day when he and my dear father had arranged their business matters together. He stopped abruptly, shook hands with me, and said, with much emotion,

“You are aware, I suppose, what a friend in need Dr. Newton has just proved to me. May I detain you, who are very dear to my wife, to add that *but* for her, and the obligation I am under to provide

her a home and a position of some kind, no earthly consideration should have tempted me to take advantage of *your* father's noble generosity."

"I am very glad it is all settled," I replied, with one of my serenest smiles.

And thenceforth he and I met and parted in the presence of others continually, without distressing consciousness or the least tinge of embarrassment on either side.

I had slain *my* lion, and I have every reason to believe that he had done equally successful execution upon *his*.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE YOUNG SQUIRE DOES AS HE PLEASES.

THE next event that startled our small Lidmere world out of its usual sleepy condition—a condition it had quietly resumed as soon as Dr. Marsden had made about two rounds of professional visits as my father's partner—was the sudden death of Mr. Radcliff of the Grange. Mrs. Radcliff had called a few days before and taken me back to luncheon, for she evidently still considered herself bound to oblige her absent son by showing me some occasional attention, and her husband had then occupied his place at table, and had

appeared in his ordinary health. Mrs. Radcliff had told me, however, that his attacks were becoming more frequent and more alarming, and that she had sent for Gilbert, whom she had every reason to think was now on his way home. I believe it was this clever woman's policy to talk to me always openly of her son, assuming that she and I perfectly understood one another, and that I was an entirely uninterested recipient of all her family confidences. For undoubtedly she was getting into the habit of opening her mind to me on many subjects—perhaps because I was a good and a patient listener—and I was gradually becoming initiated into most of the hopes and aspirations she cherished for her own and her son's future. Mrs. Radcliff had not been a bad wife ; she had even aimed (as has been before stated) at passing as a model one, and I imagine she was fairly

attached to her indulgent, easy-going husband ; but being essentially what is called a woman of the world, which implies having no inconvenient amount of feeling, except of a purely selfish kind, she had so far reconciled herself to the idea of being soon left a widow, as to form her plans and projects, consequent on that event, with singular equanimity and fortitude.

She meant to induce Gilbert, who would then come into possession of the estate, to let it for some years, and to take her abroad, allowing the money realised by the hire of the Grange to accumulate while they were away, and eventually using it for the clearing or partial clearing of the involved property. "For although," she added, in her charmingly confiding style, "Gilbert *must* marry money, I should like him to begin his squireship, and his responsibilities as a husband, free

from all pecuniary embarrassments, and giving his wife no excuse for boasting that *her* wealth was the chief support of the family dignity."

I used to smile to myself over all these air-castles, having an idea that Gilbert would not be found quite so amenable to maternal guidance as Mrs. Radcliff, in the strength of her unyielding will, supposed.

But comfortably prepared as this strong-minded lady had shown herself for her husband's removal from a world of trial, I believe the extreme suddenness of his death proved a decided shock to her nervous system.

My father was summoned, at about five o'clock one morning, by a groom who had ridden down in hot haste to announce his master's critical condition; but doctor and patient never met in life again, as the suffering man had drawn his last struggling

breath some minutes before my father (who had not lost a second) stood by his bedside.

There remained only the widow to prescribe for and comfort now. She was terribly and obstinately hysterical for the first day or two after the event, refused to eat, and said many bitter things against her son because he had not arrived in time to see his father. By the time poor penitent Gilbert did arrive, which was a week after the funeral, the widow was considerably better, and when they appeared together at church the following Sunday, everybody said that the son looked as if he was mourning both for his mother and himself. They were, however, very quiet and home keeping for some weeks succeeding this, and Miss Mullett was sent with cards of acknowledgment to all the Lidmere gentry, in return for the visits of

condolence and messages of inquiry with which the Lidmere gentry had deemed it right to besiege the Grange.

I happened to be at home when the oppressed companion called upon me, and as she said she was in no hurry, I urged her to partake of cake and wine, and did not discourage her in her inclination to talk.

"I know," she said, half apologising for her tale-bearing, "that Mrs. Radcliff tells you everything, and I am sure she misses you as a convenient listener immensely, but you are too dangerous, now Mr. Gilbert is at home, to be brought into that young gentleman's company, and so the poor lady has to fall back upon me, poor me! who am only snubbed and ridiculed and used as a nurse for that hateful poodle, unless it suits my mistress to treat me, *pro tem.*, as a human being with human

feelings. Miss Newton, never wonder that the hired companions of fine ladies grow bitter and spiteful against the world. *Their* world is represented by their heartless employers, and they see nothing of humanity beyond."

When the injured speaker had recovered from her little personal moan, and refreshed herself by a sip of wine, she went on glibly :

"I must confess it is nuts to me to see the new squire getting things mostly his own way, when the old dowager meant to have him completely under her thumb. He positively declines going out of the country, and intends to remain here and manage the estate himself, offering to live as quietly and plainly as any ordinary gentleman, and to economize, to the extremest limit of a decent keeping up of appearances. But *this* is by no means what my lady

wants. Economy and quiet living, as *he* understands them, would not suit her book at all;" (Miss Mullett's language, you see, was less refined than expressive); "so she stipulates that if they stay at the Grange—and he implores her to make it her home still, though the old man has left her enough to live where she likes—she shall, by-and-by, have what company it pleases her to invite; and he good-naturedly says she may. Of course her object is to secure Gilbert a rich wife, and he guesses this, and, I fancy, laughs in his sleeve. Miss Newton, I admire and esteem that young man, and I think I know where his heart is. Well, life is a queer concern, and the ups and downs in it amazing—witness the history of the Marsdens, who I hear are looking out for a house of their own, Mrs. M. having an interesting event in prospective."

I did not tell Miss Mullett that I knew this to be true, but it was; and dear Mildred was the busiest and happiest little wife, and mother in expectancy, in the whole wide world.

My pleasantest days, by far, were those I spent with her at Abbeygates, helping her with her piles of needlework mostly of a very pretty, diminutive kind; discussing the merits of the houses we had last inspected; chatting as young women chat who have no secrets from each other, and of course magnifying the coming "interesting event," as Miss Mullett had sagaciously called it, into an affair of the most stupendous importance.

But if *we* looked upon it in this natural light, and made an immense to do about it, what was it all compared with the excitement and exhilaration of the worthy spinsters, who, in the ecstatic hope of

becoming great aunts to a wee Heber or Mildred, knew not how to contain themselves.

It was beyond description comical to see the mysteriousness of their looks whenever they approached the subject, and Mildred declared that they both blushed and cast their eyes upon the ground if they accidentally touched, even with their little finger, one of the tiny garments that were in course of fabrication. She said too, but I think this was pure mischief, that they would have been proud to assist in the work if their extreme modesty had not stood in their way. Against such a slander came out, at last, the fact that they had been knitting lilliputian socks, in private, for several months, and that these were presented with as small an amount of shame-facedness as could be expected under the circumstances.

We were now in early Spring again, and Mildred often drove out with me, for she was not quite so strong as those about her could have wished, and the house-hunting, which her husband had to leave to her, exhausted her more than it should have done. He was very tender over his young wife if anything ailed her; but I am bound to say that the spoiling and petting process was still carried on chiefly by her.

When he came in at night, tired, and often a little depressed, Mildred would fly to get him anything he wanted, would kiss him and condole with him, and tell him he must *not* kill himself with work, till I often wondered that the man could tolerate being made such a fool of. But, in point of fact, he liked it—this wifely homage and adulation had become a necessity of his being, and I am sure he would have

missed it cruelly had it been abruptly withdrawn.

There was, however, no fear of this as long as Mildred continued to breathe the breath of life. To her, Heber Marsden was ever the one man in the world to be exalted and worshipped, and I foresaw that however fond a mother she might hereafter become, she would still feel that the husband was, in the expressive Scripture words, "better to *her* than ten sons."

By the end of May the young couple had found and taken possession of a charming little cottage of their own, and I never heard any complaints from either of them of stuffy rooms or smoky chimneys, by which I inferred that Dr. Marsden had learned a lesson of contentment since the days when he and I dreamt our idle dreams amongst the valleys and mountains of romantic Wales.

In June, Mildred's child was born—a sweet, fair-haired little girl, whom she would insist on naming Constance—I being, of course, its godmamma, my twin in that responsible office dear Mrs. Graham, for the gratification of the father, who kept up his old friendship at Woodleigh, and spent there whatever of his scanty leisure he did not spend at home.

My father assured me that he worked with very fair energy and perseverance now, and that he had never regretted taking him as a partner. They shared between them—the old ugly doctor and the handsome young one—the popularity once enjoyed by Dr. Marsden alone. My father chose the less wealthy class of patients, and sent Dr. Marsden to the aristocracy of the neighbourhood—to the Grange always; and it is worthy of record that Mrs. Radcliff, in spite of her strong

prepossession in favour of elderly and experienced doctors, did not object.

I should mention here that, since the return of her son, the widowed lady of the Grange had not sought my society with any frequency, nor had we met, except at church, even by accident, during the whole Winter. Every Sunday Gilbert had waited in the porch or in the churchyard to shake hands with my father and myself in his own genial, cordial way; but he had done nothing more than this, and his mother, however watchful and however suspicious she might have been, had certainly no reason to take alarm.

There was no entertainment of the Lidmere gentry that Christmas at the Grange on account of Mr. Radcliff's recent death, but the young squire (as Gilbert was everywhere called) liberally regaled all his own tenants and labourers, with as many

of the village poor as chose to gather to the ample feast.

Immediately after Christmas, mother and son left home, the former declaring that her health and spirits imperatively exacted change, and making it a personal favour that Gilbert should not condemn her to go alone. It was soon known in Lidmere that they were visiting different London friends, and Miss Mullett, who remained at the Grange in charge of the establishment to her own supreme contentment, told me privately that Mrs. Radcliff was out on a foraging expedition, her hoped-for prey being all the rich maids and widows she either knew already, or might come to know.

“And by-and-by,” added the observant companion, “she will fill her son’s house with these charmers, and confidently expect the squire to make his choice of a wife

from amongst them. It will be fine sport to see her manœuvring, as opposed to his stolid, good-humoured coolness. Gilbert is really inimitable in his treatment of his mother, paying her every possible respect, leaving the reins of domestic government wholly in her hands, allowing her to think that she has got a silken bridle round his neck too, but all the time, if I mistake not, as determined to do what pleases him as though no such arbitrary and strong-willed individual as his lady mother existed. And he is quite right. Why should that woman have everything her own way, and trample everybody under her disdainful feet? For my part, I hope Gilbert will marry a wife he can love if she has not a gown to her back—and I believe he is man enough to try hard still for the one he has in his eye."

Miss Mullett proved a true prophetess as

regarded the coming hospitalities at the hitherto quiet Grange. Mrs. Radcliff and her son remained in town as long as the season lasted, and immediately afterwards they came down with a perfect phalanx of fashionable guests, amongst whom young lady heiresses and wealthy widows undoubtedly preponderated.

This was in the month of July, and all Lidmere woke up at the gay doings that went on at the stately mansion its adjacent town was naturally so much interested in. There were brilliant riding parties sweeping through the streets every morning; there were archery meetings in the park; there was boating on the lake; there were picnics; there were *al fresco* entertainments; there were dances and games in the evening; and the distant echo of all of this, which we were not happy enough to behold with our own dazzled eyes, came to

us through a variety of sources, to me, individually, through Miss Mullett, who loved to drop in and have a gossip either at my house or Mildred's concerning what was being done at the Grange, and to make her own pithy comments both on the doings and the doers.

She told us, even in the first week, that two or three of the young ladies, and one rather nice widow, with heaps of money, were getting sweet upon Gilbert, and that Mrs. Radcliff openly favoured the widow, and was in the highest spirits. This life of excitement was, after all, her natural element, and the old languor and weariness of everything, herself included, were rarely noticeable now.

Well, so much for Miss Mullett's communications, which amused Mildred and myself a good deal, our own daily lives being singularly devoid of excitement,

though tiny Miss Constance was on the stage, and affording her mother, at least, an equal degree of interest and employment.

But another and rather curious link was established between us—meaning now my father and myself—and the utterly transformed Grange.

From the very beginning of the racketing in that noble dwelling, its young master had commenced paying a weekly visit at our house, always timing his coming late in the evening when he knew my father would be at home, never asking to *see* me, though never failing to make inquiries *about* me, and invariably bringing on each occasion a splendid bouquet of hothouse flowers, and saying, as he laid them down, “For Miss Newton’s drawing-room.”

“Conny,” my father used to remark,

“depend on it, this is the young squire’s eccentric mode of recommencing his wooing. He will not tease you with silly, love-sick epistles, or with verbal protestations of his devotion, but he means you to understand, if by chance you may have got scent of his mother’s courtship *for* him of the rich maids and widows she has lured to the Grange, that he is still courting the one maiden whom alone his honest heart has made choice of. I wish, my child,” the dear man would sometimes add with a sigh, “I could think it safe to back him to win in the end.”

“Don’t talk nonsense, you absurd old man, or grow romantic in your advancing years,” I would answer lightly. “Gilbert comes to gossip with you because he likes you personally, and is perhaps a little sick of fine ladies and ceaseless gaiety. As for the flowers, that is pure benevolence. He

knows I appreciate them, and from all we hear, he is fast growing into a philanthropist, and a man of large-hearted and open-handed charity."

"He will make a first-rate country gentleman, Conny, and be a blessing to his own immediate dependents, and to the neighbourhood. You may remember that you and I predicted well of him the very first time we saw him in his father's house. Have you forgotten?"

"No, papa," I said demurely, in answer to this, "my memory is still, in spite of life's vicissitudes, remarkably good."

It was only at church that I ever saw and spoke to Gilbert Radcliff. Then he *would* wait to have a passing word with me, to squeeze my hand nearly to pulp, and to give me a wistful look out of his frank blue eyes that sometimes touched and sometimes only amused me.

As the Summer waned—it had been to me a Summer of tranquil, grateful enjoyment, amongst the few friends I cultivated and loved—we learned through Miss Mullett that, before the Grange guests took their final departure, which would not be till the end of September, there was to be, at Gilbert's special desire, a fête in the park, for the entertainment of Lidmere and its vicinity.

Mrs. Radcliff was strongly opposed to the idea, raising every kind of difficulty, but her son quietly and firmly waived her objections, intimating that it was his first independent action as head of the estate, and that the thing was to be. He had added that she need not have the slightest annoyance or fatigue in the matter, as he himself would do the whole honours and undertake the entire responsibility; upon which Mrs. Radcliff had hastened to

reply (Miss Mullett was present at this little scene) that it was not fatigue she shrank from, and even if she did, there was Mrs. Grafton (*the* widow) to help him in receiving his guests. She would do it to perfection, and be, in short, the right woman in the right place.

"Perhaps she would, mother," her son had answered with a funny little smile—"and you and she can settle your respective parts between you."

Miss Mullett gave it as her opinion that Mrs. Radcliff had looked upon this as something encouraging—a token, however slight, that Gilbert was beginning to appreciate the fair and captivating widow's charms.

I had told my father, when we first heard of the projected gathering, that I would rather not go, and I meant it, because I was quite certain Mrs. Radcliff would prefer my staying away, and that

she would narrowly and suspiciously watch my every movement ; but when, at length, the invitations were issued, Colonel Graham reminded me of my old promise to accompany his wife to one of these entertainments, and as she wished to go, and *he* would not, I did not like to disoblige him.

Mildred was of course invited, but she considered, as we all did, that Mrs. Radcliff had behaved so badly to her, at the time of her marriage, that she was justified in declining, notwithstanding the fact I pointed out to her, that Gilbert was the giver of the fête, and not his mother. I suspect her real dislike to going was connected with a fear of leaving baby Constance for a whole day, as well as an unwillingness to be absent from home when her husband came in and wanted his slippers and his tea.

So Mrs. Graham and myself went in

company, driving to the entrance of the park in my father's carriage, and then getting out and walking through the same sheltered and delightful plantation where Gilbert, eighteen months ago, had asked me to be his wife.

Of course I thought of it, as my companion and myself strolled leisurely through the wood, admiring the changing hues of the rich foliage, rejoicing in the loveliness of the September day, speculating on the amusements that the young squire had prepared for his guests, and otherwise filling up the time, which was to us, just then, a time of holiday relaxation and pleasure.

As we approached the open park, gay sights and sounds met our eyes and ears —tents with streaming flags, archery targets, groups of people, music, laughter, and talking to an almost bewildering extent.

But we were bound for the house first, it having been notified that all the guests were to be received in front of the mansion by the master himself; so, keeping as much as we could under the shelter of the trees, and avoiding the crowded glades and paths, we arrived, by-and-by, a little warm and tired, at our destination, and were accidentally the only two pedestrians reporting ourselves at that exact time.

“You look charming, my dear,” abruptly exclaimed Mrs. Graham, *à propos* of nothing except the trivial fact that I had instinctively put up my hand to arrange my bonnet and veil, “I never saw you look nicer. There is Mr. Radcliff coming down the steps to meet us—the two ladies do not move.”

Gilbert must have had a good and a long sight if he recognised us at the

distance we then were ; but I think he did, for he made gigantic strides, and was standing in front of us, with beaming face and outstretched hands, before I had quite recovered my breath after our warm walk.

He shook hands with us both, and then offered me, the single lady, his arm. I thought this a disgraceful breach of etiquette, but as Mrs. Graham fell a little back there was no use in making a scene. I only said,

“As this preliminary ceremony is over, Mr. Radcliff, why are not Mrs. Graham and myself to turn back into the park at once? What are you going to do with us?”

“As jolly a girl as ever,” he replied, in a low voice; adding cheerfully, “I am going to take you to my mother and to introduce you to that very charming lady standing beside her, who is doing me the favour of

helping in the reception of my guests. Don't you think young widows, especially rich ones, are irresistible, Miss Newton?"

"You ought to be the best judge of that," I said, laughing a little. "I have no doubt they are."

"Oh! they are, upon my honour," he gravely protested. "You will be captivated with Mrs. Grafton in half a minute, and you shall give me your honest opinion of her by-and-by. Mother," suddenly changing his tone, and speaking with a subdued earnestness that took me by surprise, "here is your old friend, Miss Newton. It is long since you have met."

Mrs. Radcliff went a little white as she descended one step—I had mounted several—and held out her hand.

"Miss Newton is welcome amongst our many friends and neighbours to-day," she said stiffly, and then turned to greet Mrs.

Graham, who was already in the possession of the elegant and over-gracious widow, and only released from a shower of pretty speeches from that lady's rosy lips, as Gilbert said, in his brightest voice,

"Mrs. Grafton, here is another friend I wish to present to you—Miss Newton, of whom you may have heard me casually speak. But we must not keep her standing. She is tired."

Mrs. Grafton directed a fine pair of eyes towards my poor blushing face, gave me her creamy little hand, which must suddenly have lost its elasticity, as it made no attempt to close round mine, repeated with a slight modification the words she had heard Mrs. Radcliff use to me, and then said in a plaintive, childish voice (she was no child though)—

"I am tired too, Mr. Radcliff, and will with your permission suspend my duties

for half an hour, and go and rest in the house."

"And here are more people coming up, my dear Gilbert," exclaimed his mother, in something far beyond a vexed tone. "These ladies probably know their way back to the open park, where they can obtain rest and refreshment immediately."

Gilbert, still smiling good-humouredly, led us down the steps, which we were glad enough to place between ourselves and the haughty lady of the Grange.

"I shall be in the park shortly," he said, addressing me, "and mind, I have got to hear your opinion of the delicious widow. The largest tent holds the refreshments. Pray, Mrs. Graham, find your way there at once, and help yourself and your friend to the restoratives you must so greatly need."

"A charming squire!" said Mrs. Gra-

ham, with a suggestive look, when we were again alone ; “but I am not in love with his mother, Constance. Did she *mean* to be specially rude and chilling to you?”

“No doubt of that,” I replied ; and then I fell to thinking, while a shadow as of some excitement close at hand darkened momentarily the brightness of the festive day.

CHAPTER XV.

THE COURTSHIP ENDED.

THE refreshment tent, which we soon found, was quite a banqueting hall, and supplied with every delicacy and with every tempting viand that gardens and cellars could produce, or money purchase. There was also a large staff of servants and waiters to attend upon the hungry or thirsty guests, and when we went in we had to elbow our way amongst half a hundred voracious individuals of both sexes, who appeared as eager to partake of all the good things around them as

though they had come here to-day with that sole object in view. Probably some of them had.

Mrs. Graham and myself, having succeeded in obtaining a seat, could afford to wait patiently till one of the numerous officials was at liberty to bring us our share of the dainty feast, and as soon as we had satisfied exhausted nature, and had exchanged greetings with a few acquaintances and neighbours, we were glad to leave the scene of so much excitement and clatter and animal eagerness, and to seek a quieter spot wherein to prolong our rest, and to watch the moving, animated groups dispersed about the lovely park.

On a slight eminence which overlooked the whole busy arena, we discovered a small tent tastefully fitted up with flowers and easy chairs, and a table covered with books and other light literature, and

evidently intended for such of the guests as were too refined to mingle with the general crowd, or for those who preferred repose and mental food to locomotion and excitement under any conditions.

Here we remained quite alone, and appreciating our luxurious refuge beyond everything, for above an hour, I wondering a little, secretly, that Gilbert had not made his appearance, my companion wondering at the same thing openly, and suggesting that his mother may have hindered his coming into the park, lest the special danger she apprehended should await him there.

But at length, and just as we were both growing very sleepy, in the warmth of the bright afternoon, and in the balmy air which fanned us, as we indolently reclined on the tempting lounges provided for us, we saw two gentlemen coming towards

our tent—not rapidly, for one was stout and evidently asthmatic, and the other had to suit his pace to his companion's infirmities, though as they approached nearer I could see that he was not doing this willingly, or with that “large-hearted benevolence” for which the young master of the Grange was acquiring such universal credit.

I really pitied the elder gentleman—he must have been quite sixty—as he struggled, gasping and wheezing, up the little hillock after his leader, who, having reached the entrance of the tent, said pleasantly,

“I knew you ladies would find out my impromptu hermitage, but I had hoped to join you long before now.” Then turning to his friend, he motioned for him to advance, and continued, addressing Mrs. Graham this time, “Here is a gentleman,

Mrs. Graham, who thinks he knew your husband in India, and who without doubt knew *a* Colonel Graham intimately. Allow me to introduce you to my good friend, General Macnutt—General Macnutt, Mrs. Graham. He is most anxious to have a chat with you of old times in the East. Will you sit here with him, or walk down and look at the merry-makers below? I am going to take Miss Newton, if she will permit me, for a little turn, and will restore her to you presently.”

Two things struck me specially while Gilbert Radcliff was thus speaking, the first being that poor General Macnutt was anxious for nothing but to unbutton his tight-fitting military waistcoat, and get a free breath, and the other, that the young squire was himself growing exceedingly bold, as well as inventive and intriguing.

Mrs. Graham, only partially alive, how-

ever, to his present ruse, gracefully acknowledged the introduction to the wheezing General, and said she would remain in the tent if he did not object. The poor man eagerly declared that he should infinitely prefer it, and then Gilbert, with his whole face brimming over with suppressed mirth, drew me gently from my seat, gave me his arm, and led me triumphantly away.

"Do you reckon cruelty amongst the cardinal virtues, Mr. Radcliff?" I asked, as we descended the slope, and began the "little turn," he had planned for me, across the open glade.

"Oh, it is all right," he said, laughing gleefully now. "The old fellow was drinking too much, and it was a charity to take him from the wine bottle. He really did once meet a Colonel Graham in Calcutta; and he'll get on famously with that nice woman, when they are alone. Don't trouble any

more about him, pray. *I* want all your attention for a short time. And first, I will ask you a question in my turn. How do you think this heterogeneous entertainment is going off, Miss Newton; are the good people really enjoying themselves?"

Somewhat surprised, I answered, "I should say, 'immensely,' if enjoyment is represented by laughter and loud talking, and unlimited eating and drinking, and going to and fro, like lunatics, under a broiling sun;—but why do you make such an inquiry of me who have not been amongst them? Mrs. Graham and myself found out that delicious tent, and have been resting there ever since we left the sumptuous luncheon-palace at one o'clock."

"Yes," he said, quietly, "I knew it would suit you. I had it pitched and fitted up expressly for you—but now for your question. I wanted your opinion of

the fête and its success, because you are really answerable for the whole affair; without you it had never had a beginning, and consequently would have been without progress or end. Let me go on, please, and you shall say all you wish, when I have done. Can you not understand that I have grown tired and heart-sick at never having a chance of a word with you in private. If I had asked to see you in your father's house, you might have declined; if I had got my mother to bring you up here, other people would have been in our way. A monster gathering like this, settles all difficulties, therefore a monster gathering I resolved to convene. Now, don't be impatient"—(I had shown no signs of being so)—"for I have much more to say, and I am resolved on being master on my own domain for once. We are coming to the plantation, Miss Newton,

and to the spot where, eighteen months ago, you sent me from you a very sorrowful-hearted man, though, odd as you may think it, not altogether a despairing one. I believed in the intense earnestness of my own purpose, and I have gone on believing in it ever since. When we arrive at the exact spot where we parted, I have something to show you that may make you smile. In the meanwhile, you must be good-natured and listen to me still. I told you, on the occasion I am referring to, that I would serve for you as long and patiently as the great patriarch, Jacob, served for his best loved wife, and so I would, if there were a 'needs-be' in the case; but it has struck me lately that those ancient worthies had plenty of time to wait, and that it is rather hard upon a fellow who is only to count upon his three-score years and ten, to expect him to be as

our tent—not rapidly, for one was stout and evidently asthmatic, and the other had to suit his pace to his companion's infirmities, though as they approached nearer I could see that he was not doing this willingly, or with that “large-hearted benevolence” for which the young master of the Grange was acquiring such universal credit.

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I asked, in a voice that shook and quivered suggestively—"you said there was something in this spot for me to see?"

"Yes," he answered, readily and brightly, having probably read the sign aright ; "and first, here is a bench for you to rest upon, for I have been merciless to those poor, weary little feet. And now"—when we were both seated side by side—"look at this baby-tree of mountain ash. I planted it on *that* day and within the very square foot of ground where your hand met mine at parting. I said to myself that, if it took root and grew, I should win you yet (for it was not the season for planting trees), but that, if it withered and died, there would be no shadow of hope for me. It has lived and grown to this vigorous young sapling—I shall never tell you *how* I have watched it—and my hopes have grown and flourish-

ed with it. You may think superstition sits ill on a big, strong fellow like me, but we have all our pet weaknesses, and this has been one of mine."

Of course I was touched and interested, and I ceased to hide my face, though it burned like a glowing coal, from my companion, now. I even told him how grateful I felt for his constancy and his patience, but, I added, there would be still the difficulty about his mother, whose antagonism towards me was evidently stronger than ever.

For reply, he took a folded paper from his pocket, and laid it in my astonished hand.

Understanding that it was for me, I opened it nervously, and read, in pencilled characters, and these denoting excitement and agitation on the part of the writer, the following words :—

“My son, Gilbert, has convinced me at last, in a long and painful interview we have just had, that he means to please himself solely in his choice of a wife. When a man can prove to a woman that he is thoroughly and consistently in earnest, she must needs bend her will, however strong, to his. *Therefore* I release you from the promise you once gave me of never entering my son's house, or mine, till I could welcome you as a daughter. I daresay we shall get on, if you assume that relationship towards me, no worse than other mothers and daughters-in-law have done before us. Your second contingency I leave my son to discuss with you. We will meet when I have a little got over the excitement of this exciting day.

“C. R.”

“Well?” questioned Gilbert, as I finish-

ed this characteristic note and gave it back to him. "It is not over-nice, I am afraid, but— but— (you know what hangs upon it), will it do?"

He was so white and agitated that I could not keep him in suspense, and though I was not much more composed myself, I said as cheerfully as I could—

"I shall not quarrel with it, for *your* sake. The son's giving is more than enough to atone for the mother's withholding."

"My own generous girl!" he exclaimed rapturously, clasping both my shaking hands in his—"but that second contingency, Constance—you see I feel my unworthiness of such a wife, very keenly yet—that promise to my mother, that you would not marry me till you could truly and dearly love me—how about that?"

"I have kept it," I said, quietly,

looking up at him, at length, through burning blushes and moistened eyes.

Then he took me in his strong, loving arms, and kissed his thanks and his joy on the cheeks and lips that he had won for ever.

The "shades of evening" were indubitably "stealing o'er us," when Gilbert escorted me to poor Mrs. Graham, who was looking, when we entered the little tent, like patience on a monument, with a magazine in her listless hands.

The asthmatic general had wheezed himself into a profound slumber on one of the easy chairs, and was giving audible tokens of being, for the present moment, wholly indifferent to the charms of female society, as well as to the most thrilling and interesting memories in connection with his social life in India.

CHAPTER XVI.

HAND IN HAND.

WHEN I greeted my father in the evening with the news of what had occurred (he, dear man! having expected nothing more interesting than a detailed account of the festivities), his exhilaration and contentment knew no bounds.

“Conny,” he said, “this is the happiest hour of my life, except the one, thirty years ago, when I gave my first kiss to your dear mother on her consenting to become my wife.”

Then he praised Gilbert with a warmth it did my heart good to hear, and declared

that, quite apart from the position, he had never known any other man whom he could cordially welcome as a son-in-law. He did not think I need mind Mrs. Radcliff's coldness much, as she was certain to make a home for herself elsewhere, and Gilbert could scarcely miss a mother with whom he had lived so little since his earliest youth.

But there was something on my mind still, and later in the evening I referred to it with an emotion I could not conceal.

"Papa, dear," I said, nestling up to him in my old fashion, and tenderly kissing his rough, weather-beaten cheek—"though my future destiny seems fair as any human destiny can be, I cannot endure the thought that I shall be deserting you, leaving you to a solitary fireside, for all the coming years. I wish you would give up this home now, and take up your abode with us. I can

answer for Gilbert liking it as well as I should."

My father went off into one of his hearty laughs.

"You are beginning early, Miss Conny, upon my honour, to answer for the likings of your future husband. It may be as you say, for the young squire is easy-going and good-natured to the last degree; but your plan is out of the question. A pretty thing for all my patients to have to come and fetch their old doctor from the Grange. You must be dreaming, my dear child, which is, perhaps, natural under the circumstances; but set your loving heart at rest, my darling," he added, in a more serious tone, "for I have a plan too, and one that is, I hope, a little more rational than yours. I shall ask that admirable Miss Brown to come and be my housekeeper."

"Miss Brown!" I exclaimed—"your housekeeper, papa," I repeated—"it is surely you who are dreaming now. The vicar is a well-to-do man, though he does allow his daughter to dress so shabbily. What can make you think she would go into a subordinate situation, even to ensure such a pleasant home as she would have with you?"

"My dear," he said, and I believe he blushed a little, though not given to that weakness, "you misunderstand me. I mean to ask Miss Brown to be my wife. We are both elderly, it is true, but we respect and like each other, and, at any rate, I flatter myself I can brighten, to some extent, a life that has been a sufficiently joyless and unloved one hitherto. Shall you object to this lady as a step-mother?"

"Far from it, you precious, good old

man!" I said, kissing him with renewed heartiness; "I am delighted at the thought of it, and I will make her the best step-daughter in the world."

I will just mention here that my father sped successfully in his wooing, and that some weeks before I had to leave him, Miss Brown (already looking ten years younger and twenty brighter) entered Dr. Newton's house as his honoured wife, and that she ruled and reigned there, thenceforth, with the happiest result to the parties chiefly concerned.

The morning after my own earthly destiny had been fixed, Gilbert came down almost at daybreak to have an interview with my father. Between them they arranged about my settlements, which were to be liberal in the extreme, and disposed of other business matters inevitable on such important occasions. My father told

me afterwards that Gilbert seemed to think nothing he could do for me half enough, and regretted that he could not lay the whole round world at my feet.

We had a delicious walk together by the river side that morning, and I took the opportunity of relating to my future husband (as a matter of conscience) that brief episode in my life with which the reader is so well acquainted.

“I had heard some rumours of this, my darling,” he replied to it all—“but though I should never have asked you one prying question, I am glad you have told me the story yourself. It is wholly past, my Constance, is it not?”

“I should think it *was*,” I exclaimed half indignantly—“but how about Humpty Dumpty, Gilbert, and all the king’s horses, &c., &c., &c.?”

“Oh,” he said, laughing—“I can do what

all the king's horses and all the king's men may fail in doing. I have set Humpty Dumpty in her rightful place again, with the aid of my strong arms and my wholly trusting heart. Be satisfied, little woman. You are no less dear to me because you once allowed those sweet eyes of yours to beguile your judgment into a temporary slumber."

Mrs. Radcliff made no sign till the last of her guests had taken wing. Then she signified, through her son, that it would oblige her if my father and myself would go and have a quiet dinner at the Grange.

We went, and were received with very tolerable friendliness, the absence of warmth being scarcely felt, inasmuch as it had never been looked for.

After dinner she invited me to accompany her to her bedroom, but did not, on this occasion, deem it necessary to provide

specially for my bodily comfort. She had only to say to-night that the Grange would be ready for me in a month's time, as she was even now making preparations for a final departure.

"And the only request I have to make of you," she added, as I was beginning a warm protest against such needless haste, "is that you will retain my companion, Miss Mullett, in your service, as housekeeper, or humble friend, or anything you like to call her. She is but a poor creature, I know, but I have had her for a dozen years, and I have no longer occasion for her smiles or her society, as I shall visit amongst friends till that, in its turn, wearies me. Do you anticipate that you can do me the favour I am asking?"

I said I would do it willingly, and Mrs. Radcliff insisted on sending for her slave at once, and on hearing the arrangement

I proposed to Miss Mullett of continuing at the Grange, after I became its mistress, and of helping me with the housekeeping or in any other matters wherein I might require a lady's assistance.

If ever poor Miss Mullett deserved her nickname of the "Beamer" it was when she received this offer. Her whole faded, got-up face glowed with satisfaction, and she said, with genuine warmth, that she would serve me faithfully to the last day of her life.

I am bound to record that in all essential points she honestly kept her word.

Gilbert and myself were married at the end of October, as he was bent on giving me a Winter on the Continent, and on beginning our home life at the Grange early in the following Spring.

We were both agreed in choosing a quiet

wedding, though of course all our special friends were invited, and most of them came. Dr. Marsden did not come, having, he said, part of my father's work, in addition to his own, to do on that morning ; but his wife came, and was one of the brightest and fairest of my wedding guests. Colonel and Mrs. Graham came, though the latter continued to protest that she had not yet forgiven me for the awful afternoon to which I had heartlessly condemned her on the day of the fête. And the chirping, bird-like vicar (who had performed the ceremony) came, and was well pleased to see his long snubbed and unappreciated daughter presiding as mistress of Dr. Newton's house. And last, though not least, the dear little spinsters of Abbeygates came in their dove-coloured silks and white flowered caps, and were as affectionate and tremulous and bashful as ever—Miss Penelope

drawing me aside for one minute between the breakfast and the going away, to tell me through glistening tears that she did not know *how* she had kept up, as it all reminded her of the days of her youth, and of that event in her own history which had had a beginning though, alas ! no end.

We spent—my dear husband and myself—a delightfully happy Winter, going from place to place, and seeing whatever was to be seen ; but we were both glad to get home again in the month of April, just when the Grange was putting on its fairest dress, and every glory of an early Spring was scattered broad-cast over the whole land to welcome us.

We began at once the work we had determined to do—ministering, as far as we had the ability, to the temporal and spiritual wants of all those around us who came in

any way under our influence. Gilbert took the entire management of the embarrassed state in his own hands, and (Mrs. Radcliff having greatly exaggerated its embarrassments) soon succeeded in clearing it. We had no more monster gatherings of an entire neighbourhood at the Grange, but received our friends and neighbours, as we receive them still, on equal terms, and with no invidious or offensive distinctions.

We have been married now eight years, and only been blessed with one son, whom we have named, at my desire, "Gilbert," after his father. He is a sweet yellow-haired laddie, and very precocious, both mentally and physically, for his age.

Mildred, who has three boys—little Adonises, of course—declares that my Gilbert is booked for her soft-eyed Constance, adding mischievously that I may remember .

she never *did* make any account of social distinctions.

Finally, we walk, I trust, with the fear of God before our eyes ; we strive to do His will ; we are grateful beyond telling for the goodly heritage we possess ; we love each other with a tender and ever growing love ; and our sweetest hope is that, when this earthly journey shall be ended, we may still walk together, and together serve our Master, in the golden streets of the New Jerusalem.

THE END.

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